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YARF!

SEPTEMBER 27, 1997

50TH ISSUE



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FLAMING HAIRBALLS

Editorial ramblings and letters of comment from you to us and from us to you.

Welcome to our fiftieth issue! Yes, believe it or not, we've reached the half-century mark, and we're celebrating with an extra-large issue — complete with a color cover courtesy of Baron Engel, who's cooked up a charming tribute to the old Norman Rockwell paintings that graced issues of *The Saturday Evening Post* in the forties and fifties. We've also gathered lots of talent, old and new, to help us in our celebration.

And the pipes played "Amazing Grace": Mark Wallace of Tulsa, Oklahoma passed away Friday, 12 September 1997; details at this time are sketchy, but death appears to have been caused by cardiac arrest or stroke. Also known as Lord William Blackfox — his persona in the Society for Creative Anachronism — Mark was a well-known furry artist of long standing. His credits include the comic strip *Warthaven* and art for the comic limited series *Vixen's Keep*. Both take place in the fictitious region of Warthaven, where the inhabitants attempt to maintain an SCA-inspired way of life while still integrating modern conveniences. He will be missed.

A few months back, we featured a poster for the Fur Dance (organized by the Cawleys) at Baycon here in Silicon Valley. The number of folks in costume who showed up for it was quite a bit larger than expected, a most pleasant surprise! Thanks go out to . . .

"Cataroo" Cawley (Cataroo), John Cawley (Toy Fox), Jimmy Chin (Yippee Coyote), Tony de Matio (Crocodile), Shawn Keller (Brown Rabbit), Dave Kuhn (Br'er Fox), Robert Skegg (Cindy Bear), Mike Wallis (Robin Hood), Richard Wolf (Husky), "Dragon" (Husky), "Flint Otterhall" (Y. J. Coyote), "Penh Gwyn" (Pinky), "Rafeki" (Panther), "Rieshal" (Cheetah), "Smash Greywolf" (Husky), "Swift" (Rat), "Westwolf" (Westwolf), and the anonymous wearer of the tiger costume.

Albany Anthrocon this summer was, by all accounts, quite a success. One particularly successful aspect of it was a charity auction, and Andrea Lambeth of K-9 Friends penned an open letter of appreciation.

Dear Albany Anthrocon Attendees:

I want to take this time to thank each and every one of you who came and supported the auction. K-9 Friends received \$1850 because of your generosity. For the first time in four years, I will be in the black for the second half of the year. Previously, all expenses incurred from July on has come out of my pocket, but because of my sincere dedication to therapy dogs, it didn't matter. There is a lot of expense involved with running a chapter, advertising for therapy dogs, testing, certificates, mailings, and many miscellaneous expenses.

K-9 Friends is a chapter of Therapy Dogs International (TDI). Our own dogs have gone through a battery of tests I have conducted as a certified evaluator for TDI. The dogs are registered with TDI and have their own insurance and ID cards with their pictures on them.

K-9 Friends has fifty-seven members and sixty-four dogs who visit more than twenty-five facilities including nursing homes, retirement homes, adult homes, and mental health day programs. We also visit the Veterans' Administration hospital and the Center for the Disabled. My Belgian sheepdog, Indiana, and I have also visited people who have suffered head injuries and a camp for children with cancer.

In the fall, we will visit terminally ill hospice patients and their families hoping to make a difference in someone's life. As Tess, one of my volunteers who also attended the auction, said, "It's not us who benefit from the money, it's the people we visit."

Marilyn and her Doberman Farrell, Tess Stoklosa and her Samoyed Bibi, and Indiana and I had a wonderful time. We enjoyed meeting every one of you. Thank you again for your generosity.

— Andrea Lambeth

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Well, it seems our plaintive call for letters succeeded! A few folks responded with missives, and here they are. Thanks, guys! And we hope to hear from many more of our readers in upcoming issues.

Here's a new country heard from — Michael Russell of Orlando, FL:

Letters? Y'all want letters? OK!

I think *Yarf!* and *Huzzah* are the best 'zines in furry fandom. First, because they are mostly G- and PG-rated and I feel comfortable sharing them with my friends. Secondly, because the 'zine includes some of my favorite artists.

I finally finished collecting all the available issues of *Yarf!* The 'zine has done a very good job of being relatively consistent over the years. I do miss Lance [Rund]'s cartoony drawings, especially the cute tigress.

Kreutzman does some great gags, though I have grown tired of the deadline ones. In issue forty-eight, I loved it. Vixen Scouts! That's great. I would like to see more. The one-page gag works well. However, because I'm not a sci-fi fan, the gag in issue forty-nine went over my head.

I love the cover on forty-nine. It is great seeing Ken Mitchroney's artwork again, especially the whacky crew from *Space Ark*. More! More!

I tend to read Mark Stanley's *Freefall* first. Adding Joe Ekaitis' strip a couple of issues ago is a nice touch. Again, for both — more! More!

The next thing I read is Fred Patten's column. It still amazes me that he finds the time to research and read all these books as well as contribute to several APAs, edit one well-known APA, and somewhere along the way earn a living.

I thought Mark Freid's SDCC drawing in issue forty-nine was funny — and the vixen cute.

I've been fascinated by the stylings of Roy Pounds. It is hard to explain, but there is something about the detail, setting, and posing of characters that is very interesting.

I love the various illustrated con reports. Even though my job does not give me the flexibility to attend these events, I'm able to share the fun through these reports.

[J. W.] Kennedy has a weird and very funny sense of humor.

Amy Pronovost has such a "fun" style in her drawings. By the way, old gray foxes from Florida eat their ice cream just like a fox-shark. Hmmm, ice cream!

And, in issue forty-nine, Matt McCullar's "Lincoln's Log" gag was great!

In closing, I want to thank the staff and [contributors] for putting together *Yarf!* on a fairly regular basis. I always look forward to its arrival in my mailbox. I hope it will continue to grow.

And from an old grognard, Gerald Perkins of San Jose, CA:

I was doing a little housecleaning the other day — don't faint! — and I ran across *Yarf!* numbers forty-five through forty-nine — not with the vacuum — all in a pile — the wrong pile. So much for housecleaning that day. A few comments follow.

Issue forty-five: I found myself rolling on the floor after reading "Weasel Help" as forwarded by Rich Chandler. (Fortunately, it was a clean spot on the floor.) OK, mark weasels off my list of potential pets.

"Floating Debris" — Still crazy after all these issues. Still fun, too. Hey, Jim [Alves], Roy [Pounds], are we going to see the end of this or is it a Monty Python movie?

"Orientations" — Now here's a different problem — and one brave telepath to throw himself from a sheltered environment into a college campus. My only problem is that I have no idea what any of the characters look like, especially the narrator. None of them are described, nor are most of the settings.

"Ivory Trade" — I liked this tragedy. It's well told and requires the protagonists be nonhuman. The whole religious aspect of the elephants' tusks works very well.



WHEN: Saturday, 8pm
WHERE: Plaza Room, Westin Hotel
(In Horton Plaza)

San Diego Comic Con party poster by "Alyn Gryphon".

"Bandits" — Hanno and Loris keep getting better. Another tragedy, but one that fits the social environment. My hat's off to Brock Hoagland — it's *hard* to write a good short-short story.

Glad to see *Thaddeus*. I liked [Joe Ekaitis'] Web site, but lost the URL. *Yarf!* seems to be getting more "strips". Interesting.

Amara [Amy Pronovost]'s art is new to me. I liked her frilled lizard best.

Robert and Katrina — Poor Robert, all dressed for golf and "can't get no respect."

I loved "Happy Howlidays" on the back cover.

Kettjara — I'm only going to deal with this interesting strip once. This is quite a story Summer Jackson is telling. I am enjoying the plot and character development. So Kett has a cursed amulet. It will be very interesting to see what she does with it — and it with her. Summer has a different art style from anyone I've seen in *Yarf!* It fits her storytelling style.

Issue forty-six . . .

Lance Rund provides a gorgeous cover. I like very much the stained glass effect and the Shakespeare quote.



San Diego Comic Con party poster by Mitch Beiro.

Ah, Katrina, the ever ready (inside front cover). I wonder if Newt Athletics knows what she's done with their products. (And she does seem to keep going, and going, and . . .)

"Unforgiven" — I wish I could enjoy this series about Jack Salem. It's well told, set in an interesting future. However, I am neither a psychiatrist nor a criminologist, so the character of a psychotic killer puts me off. And the story is *told*, not shown. That is a legitimate viewpoint, but rather slows the story. On the other hand, I wouldn't want to be in either Jack's head or that of one of his victims.

"The Littlest Clock Watcher, Part Two" — Oops! Time flies, doesn't it, Slick? I like Roy's sense of humor.

"Awakening" — Is this the end of the *Ace of Spades* cycle? It's fitting; a tender story of two of the walking wounded healing one another. Dave Bryant did a nice job.

"Communications Breakdown" — Slick leads an interesting life with a mate(?) who is not only fantastic, but fantastical. Ordinary problems take on a cockeyed slant in a world like that. Good going, Roy.

"A Jog in the Country" — Don't you just hate those fitness buffs? (Grin!)

"A Chronology of Furry Fandom" — Thanks, Fred, for finally getting it written down. I've heard many versions, but now I have it from someone who was there.

Issue forty-seven . . .

"In Sheep's Clothing" — A pair of Jacks in this issue of *Yarf!*, one blind and the other with at least one eye. No contest; I'll take Jack Lynch, private eye. Lynch *cares* and is doing his best to straighten out a messed-up world. Clint Warlick is doing an interesting strip tease with his world. I have the feeling of coming in during the second reel of the movie, but the stories hang together as Clint gradually reveals his alternate future. PHIV: pneumonic HIV? Now there's a thought to conjure with — if you like nightmares. Just how low has the world's population sunk if industry needs to uplift animals to do jobs barely more complicated than computers can perform? I sure don't want to live through the times between now and Jack Lynch. Speaking of Jack, I notice that while Clint is slowly revealing more of Lynch's character, he has yet to tell us what Jack looks like — or even what he is. You have me hooked, Clint! More Jack Lynch stories, please.

"Yes They Are!" — Yes? Which? What? (Hee, hee!)

"From Musk to Fawn" — Ouch! I vaguely remember the title, though I never saw the movie.

Wingwarrior — Here's another story I am following with considerable interest. Will Faust has my attention. And I like the art a lot, too.

"Tastes Like Kitten!" — Amara, when the teacher said to ingest your books, I don't think she meant it literally. Those fox-sharks, I dunno.

Issue forty-eight . . .

"A Hot and Steamy Knight" — Let's see, this cover has two, three — maybe four? — levels of pun in it. Sheesh, Roy, you're stealing my thunder! (Grin!)

Hey, we get a comics page! I like.

"Cedar Point Vacation" — After a lot of thought, I have come to the conclusion that Dave Claerhout is the surrealist supreme of fur fandom. It's an acquired taste, and I think I'm acquiring it.

Robert and Katrina: "Cookies" — Hey, if you can't pounce, what's the fun? Of course, Robert has to clean up the mess. (I like thin mints, too.)

"Something to Remember" — I believe it was Avatar in *Wizards* who said, "There are old wizards and bold wizards, but there are no old, bold wizards." Maybe so, but there are old, *clever* wizards. And some care. Nice going, Smudge.

"First Dragon Hoard" — Yup. "Not yours!" Part of the first stage of distinguishing "self" from "other". But, boy, can it be hard on the others!

"The Leopard and the Roo" — Hmm, another depressing morality tale. Could we have an uplifting one?

Catnip Overdrive — I spent eighteen months Down Under and I still make no claim to understand Aussie humor. Yet I keep following the weird mob in Jason Gaffney's strip with interest.

Issue forty-nine . . .

"Late Night with *Robert and Katrina*" — Sorry, I've heard that joke so many times, it pales on me. I'm going to step outside my normal comments and compliment Kris on the beautiful way he handled the perspective on Katrina as she sprawls on the couch.

"Le Pantalon de Fromage" — Uh, yeah, like I said, Dave, surrealistic.

"So Would You Like to Take a Stroll?" — When Roy Pounds isn't being funny, he does a very good job of being tender. That's refreshing.

"Eye of a Hurricane" — Well done. Are there no happy Khrysha Zorrai stories? I guess, with her background, probably not. What a pity. Still, as we learn about her, she becomes more of a person. Ken Pick continues to show us the WebFed universe through his characters. I think he has a very good feel for the duties and behavior

of a bodyguard. I liked the very fox dominance display between the two vixens even in the face of disaster and imminent death. From my readings, that rings true. The human who was looking for B&D entertainment was, unfortunately, a non-character. He could have been dropped without hurting the story. I understand that most well-designed motorcycles create an air pocket around the rider, else he or she would get battered. It makes a very good metaphor for the kind of life the woman in the song and Khrysha Zorrai live.

"Waiting for Shadamehr (or Someone Like Him)" — Cute. I twigged to the fact the narrator was different immediately, but not to the nature of the woman's difference. Again, I felt a lack of sensory and place details, but the story works.

"Surfer Dude" — C'mon, guys, you can do better than that! If Auntie Melody won't title her pictures, try, for this one, "Spotted on the Beach".

Hokay, I wrote a lot, said a little, but that's my take on the last five issues of *Yarf!* I'm looking forward to the half-century issue.

Deadlines (marching on . . .)

Please remember that the deadlines below are *not* written in stone, and are subject to change without notice. A good rule of thumb to remember is that deadlines are the last day of every even-numbered month.

#52: 31 December 1997	#55: 30 June 1998
#53: 28 February 1998	#56: 31 August 1998
#54: 30 April 1998	#57: 31 October 1998



San Diego Comic Con party poster by Bryon Havranek.



Patten's Pontifications

by Fred Patten



Kevin & Kell: *Quest for Content*, by Bill Holbrook. Illus. Norcross, GA, Online Features Syndicate, May 1997, 138 pages, \$9.95. No ISBN #.

This is the first collection of Bill Holbrook's *Kevin & Kell* comic strip. *Kevin & Kell*'s main claim to fame is that it is the first daily strip created especially and exclusively for Internet publication, where it appears mostly on CompuServe forums. It is also one of the most imaginative funny-animal strips ever published anywhere, thanks to its clever usage of animal traits in a modern situation-comedy setting. Kevin and Kell Dewclaw are a modern couple — though their mixed marriage is definitely not typical. Kevin (in his mid-thirties) is a rabbit, and Kell (in her late twenties) is a wolf. It is the second marriage for both of them. Kevin's first marriage broke up when his militantly independent rabbit wife walked out on him, leaving him with their adopted daughter Lindesfarne (mid-teen), a porcupine. Kell's first husband was killed trying singlepawedly to bring down a moose, leaving her with a young-teen cub, Rudy. Kevin and Kell met and developed a romance through an online discussion forum. By the time they finally realized that he was a herbivore and she was a carnivore, they were too much in love to break it off.

At the time *Kevin & Kell* begins, they have been married for a year and are expecting their own first child. Lindesfarne and Rudy are in the throes of teen step-sibling rivalry. Rudy loses no opportunity to remind her that he is a macho predator, while Lindesfarne loftily points out that, as a more mature porcupine, she is nobody's prey. Kevin's and Kell's families have both disowned them in hostility over the mixed marriage, and Kevin's inept brother-in-law Ralph keeps trying to eat him. Kevin works at home, as the sysop manager of the Herbivore Forum. Kell has an office job at Herd Thinners, Inc., a public-service corporation that helps manage population control.

Kevin & Kell: Quest for Content presents the first year of the strip, from September 4, 1995 to August 29, 1996. It contains 258 Monday-Friday daily strips (actually 257; the 12/13/95 strip is accidentally printed twice and the 12/14 strip is missing) and six monthly Sunday-format strips. The humor revolves around two major topics: computers and "the law of the jungle" as applied to modern American life.

Part of Kevin's attraction for Kell was that she was tired of being pawed by the slaving, predatory males with whom she had previously associated. An early question is what the first child of their mixed marriage would be like. The child, Coney, is born two months into the strip, and how she affects their family is a continu-

ing theme. Kevin's status as a herbivore is useful for household chores. (He doesn't have to mow the lawn; he grazes it.) Contrariwise, Kell finds her job at Herd Thinners harder since she has to work farther afield to avoid preying on any of Kevin's family or friends. Rudy and Lindesfarne and their friends are focuses for teen and school-related humor. Rudy, as a wolf cub, tends to eat his own homework, both the paper variety and in field classes like "Sneaking Up On Prey 101". He develops a puppy-love relationship with Fiona Fennec, and is crushed when she has to return with her parents to the Mideast. (But they stay in touch via the Internet, providing lots of jokes based on e-mail romances.) Kevin listens to the online complaints of insects; their lifespans are so short that they're dead before they can get tech support. Rudy is scolded for drinking out of the toilet. When Lindesfarne gets into an online argument, she doesn't flame, she quills. Kevin has hardware problems because practically everyone in his household sheds. When Kevin is called away from home on a mysterious freelance assignment in early April, Rudy and Lindesfarne join forces to investigate whether he is really the Easter Bunny.

Kevin & Kell almost never merely places animal heads on human bodies. Virtually every joke depends on the animal natures of the characters: that they are carnivores or herbivores, or that they are color-blind, or that they shed. Despite this mixed cast, Holbrook has made the Dewclaws into a loving family that is more functional than many in today's television and comic-strip situation comedies.

Kevin & Kell is Bill Holbrook's third comic strip. He has been writing and drawing *On the Fastrack* and *Safe Havens*, both with human casts, for the newspapers since the 1980s; he is currently producing all three simultaneously. As a result, *Kevin & Kell* does not show the rapid changes in art style that many beginning cartoonists' strips go through during their first months. It has a professional consistency throughout.

Holbrook was a guest of honor at ConFurence VIII this past January. He announced that he was trying to sell a *Kevin & Kell* volume, but that so far no book publisher was interested because they only collected "newspaper comic strips" and *Kevin & Kell* did not appear in newspapers. Holbrook apparently gave up, because this book is self-published. *Kevin & Kell: Quest for Content* is available for \$9.95 + \$1.75 shipping from Holbrook's own Online Features Syndicate, P. O. Box 931264, Norcross, GA 30093. The book contains an advertisement for other *Kevin & Kell* merchandise such as T-shirts, screen savers, and mouse pads.



Reinardus; Yearbook of the International Reynard Society. Illus. Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988–1997, ca. 200–250 pages each, Hfl. 117,— each for the first nine volumes, Hfl. 130,— for vol. 10; ISSN: 0925-4757.

I would like to thank Michael Russell of Orlando for informing me about the International Reynard Society and its Yearbook. To quote from the Society's literature, "*The International Reynard Society was founded in 1975 by Professor Kenneth Varty of the University of Glasgow and the late Nico Van Den Boogaard of Amsterdam, to group together medievalists and other scholars in [. . .] essentially, the associated fields of the so-called 'Beast Epic' of Reynard the Fox, the Fable tradition, and the short comic narrative genre exemplified by the Old French Fabliaux.*" It has held an International Colloquium in Europe every two years since 1975 (Glasgow in 1975, Amsterdam in 1977, Münster in 1979, Paris in 1981, and so on), almost always at universities; a special out-of-sequence colloquium was held in Tokyo in July 1996.

Its Yearbook consists primarily of the publication of scholarly papers that have been read at these colloquiums. "*Reinardus aims to promote comparative research in the fields of medieval comic, satirical, didactic, and allegorical literature, with emphasis on beast epic, fable and fabliau, including sources, influences and later developments into the modern period. The methods and critical interpretations it offers are as wide-ranging as is its subject matter, since it considers discussion and the co-existence of conflicting views as more important than the defence of a specific methodological point of view.*"

Each volume consists of fifteen to twenty-five papers in either English or French (and very occasionally Italian), usually about evenly divided. Despite the Society's comment about "later developments into the modern world", there are barely a handful of articles that touch on anything more recent than the eighteenth century. Some average titles are "Shepherds, Wolves, Foxes and Others in Spencer's *Shepherd's Calendar*", "When Pigs Consecrate a Church; Parodies of Liturgical Music in the *Ysengrimus* and Some Medieval Analogies", "The New Naturalism of *Le Bestiaire d'Amour*", "The Fox and the Hero: *Skaufalabálkur* in its Native Milieu", "Mutorum Animalium Conloquium, or: Why Do Animals Speak?", "The Dutch Chapbooks of *Reynaert de Vos* and Their Illustrations", "Le Rôle du Zoomorphisme dans le *Speculum Stultorum*", "Reinhart, Baldewin et Ysengrin: Controverse Autour d'une Lacune", "O Faulse Beste Fine . . . : Quelques Remarques à Propos du Chat Dans la Fable Ésoquique du XVIe Siècle". Most articles are unillustrated, but there are a couple in each volume that include plates showing Medieval or Renaissance woodcuts, photo-

graphs of humorous carvings in old churches, and the like.

Frankly, *Reinardus* seems too academically dull for the average "Furry fan". However, it is an excellent source for information about all aspects of the medieval *Reynard the Fox* fable and other talking-animal satires. The discussions of *Reynard* encompass profiles of the entire cast: King Nobel the lion, Isengrim the wolf, Bruin the bear, Tibault the cat, Baldwin the donkey, Chantecleer the rooster, Grimbert the badger, Belyn the ram, Cuwert the hare and many others who have faded into anonymous background roles in the streamlined modernizations. These essays also detail the brutal and adult nature of the original fable. In modern versions, Isengrim asks King Nobel to punish Reynard because the fox has "insulted" him, which implies little more than that the wolf is haughty and not bright enough to think of witty comebacks. The unexpurgated tale specifies how the insult was that Reynard broke into the wolf's home during his absence to rape his wife and blind his cubs, just to flaunt his power. The original texts quoted in *Reinardus* will be of interest to anyone wanting to compile notes on Medieval French and Dutch scatology, obscenities, and erotic scurrility.

Reinardus is also horrendously expensive. The current foreign exchange rate of the Dutch guilder is US 50.8¢. This makes the first nine volumes approximately \$60.00 apiece, and the current volume \$66.00, not counting shipping. However, the cost is only US \$30.00 per volume to members of the International Reynard Society, and membership in the Society is free upon request. For membership information, inquire to the International Secretary, Dr. Brian J. Levy, Department of French, The University of Hull, Hull HU6 7RX, England, UK; or e-mail b.j.levy@french.hull.ac.uk. For information about ordering *Reinardus*, the publisher's North American address is John Benjamins North America, P. O. Box 27519, Philadelphia, PA 19118-0519; phone, (215) 836-1200; e-mail, customer.services@benjamins.nl; on the World-Wide Web, <http://www.benjamins.nl>.

To digress, even if the Society and *Reinardus* are too scholarly for the tastes of most of our group, it seems incredible that apparently none of us (with the exception of Michael Russell) have even been aware of the existence of this international society of enthusiasts of talking-animal legends and stories, which has been holding conferences all around Europe (and in Japan) every two years since 1975, and publishing a thick annual collection of studies for the past decade. I have been active in 'morph fandom since the early 1980s, and I had never heard of such an organization during all this time. It makes one wonder what other anthropomorphisms may be out there that we don't know about. ♣

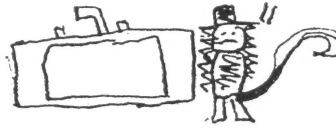
MP

The Most Pretentious
Postcode in the World!

ALIENSATE MY KITCHEN!

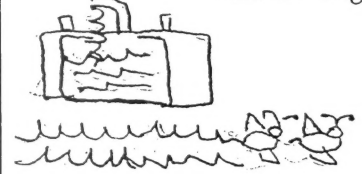
µwave zapper

Grumble.

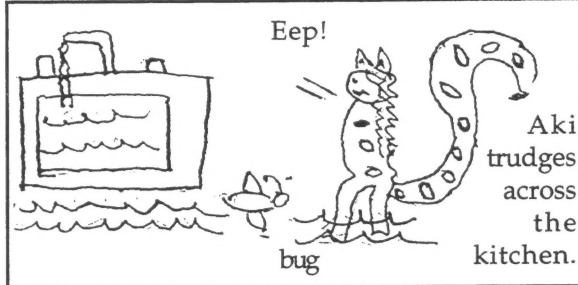


Poor Tom. He's gotta do dishes.

Uh-oh. The water
runs too long.



AND
THEN...



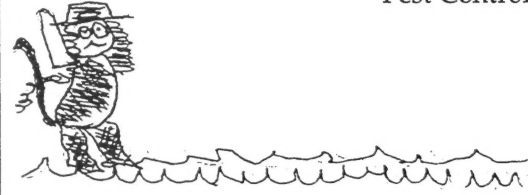
Eep!

Aki
trudges
across
the
kitchen.

bug

Help!

Tom calls the
Pest Control.



bath towel

Yes, dear ...



Aki dries
herself off.

Find the flea
and win a prize!

KNOCK
KNOCK



Who Can It Be Now?
(Everybody sing!)



There are lots of fleas! Everybody wins!

Aaargh!



It's everyone's favourite pest control!

Of course, we have to
have our season-ending
cliffhanger!

Will the aliens leave
Tom's and Aki's kitchen?
Will Tom and Aki have
peace and quiet?

Tune in next time!

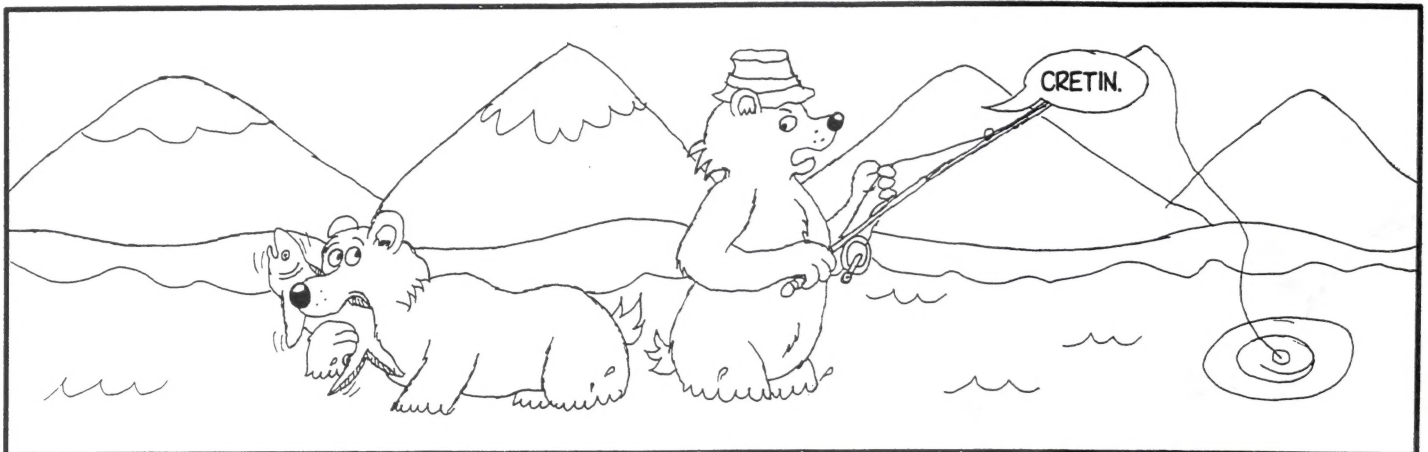
Story and scrawls by

[Handwritten signature]

Bugs by Mother Nature
Inspiration by Dave B., as usual
Dave by Mr. and Mrs. B.
Pest Control by the BBC.

Thaddeus

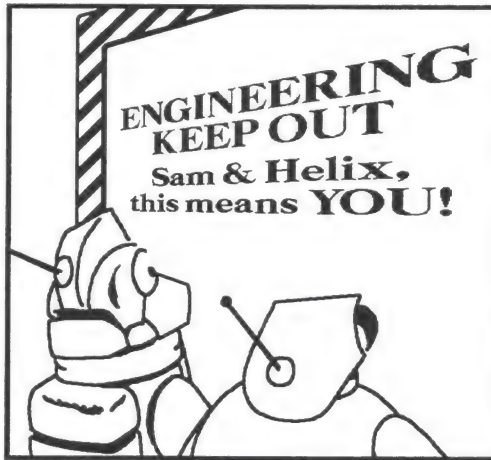
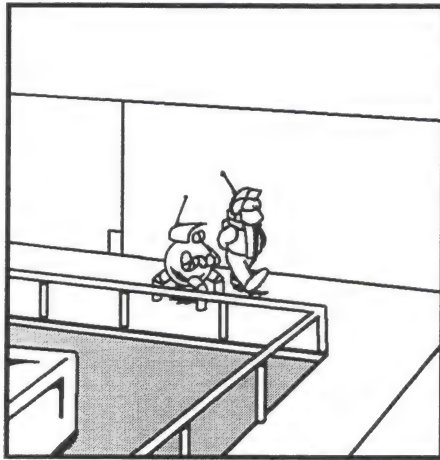
by Joe Ekaitis



jekaitis@ix.netcom.com

The Funny Page!

Freefall by Mark Stanley



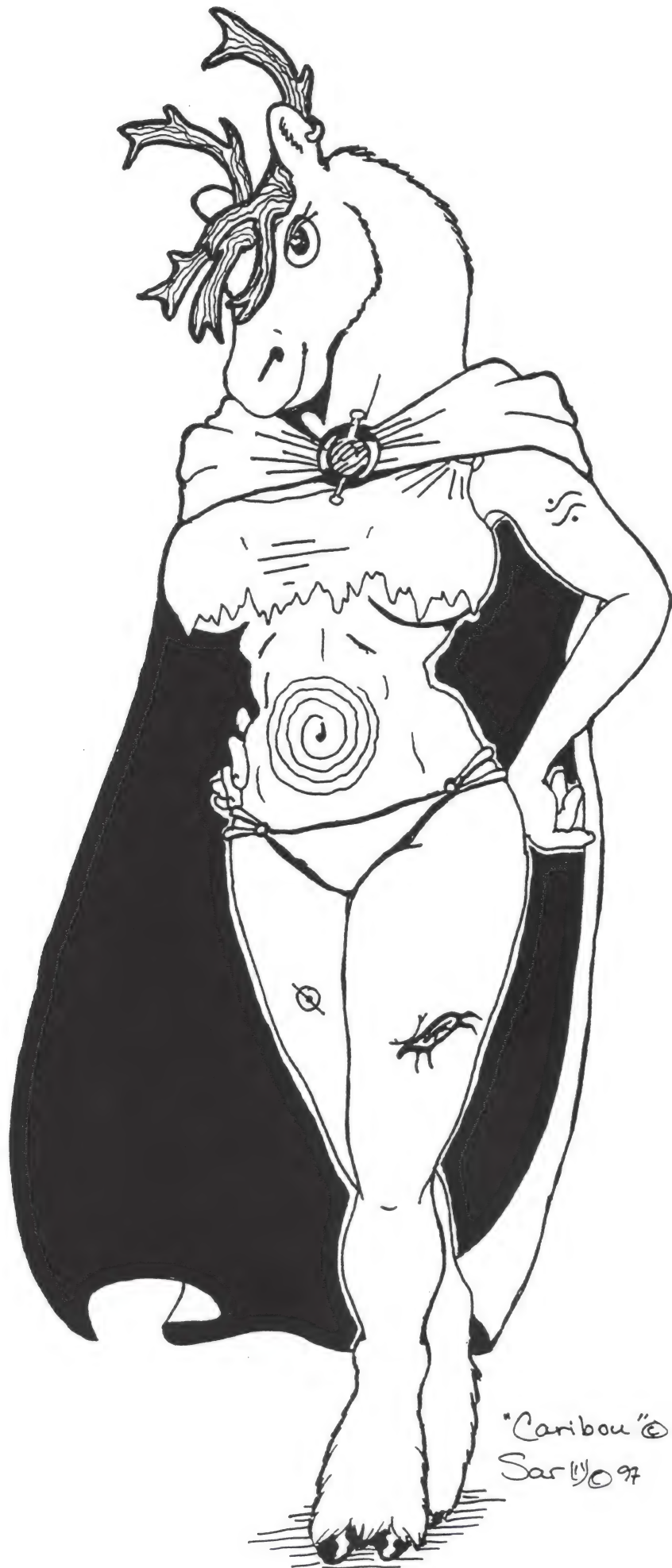
LIMPIDITY



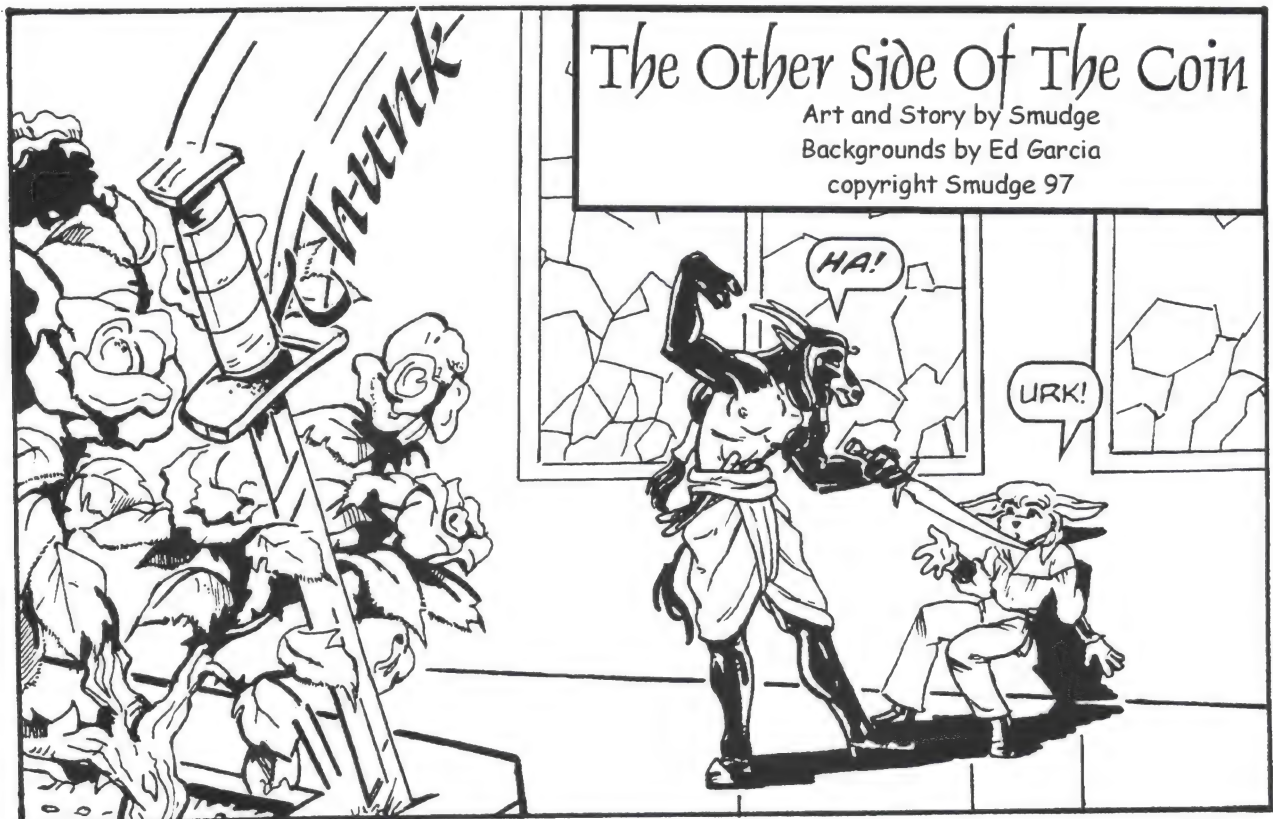
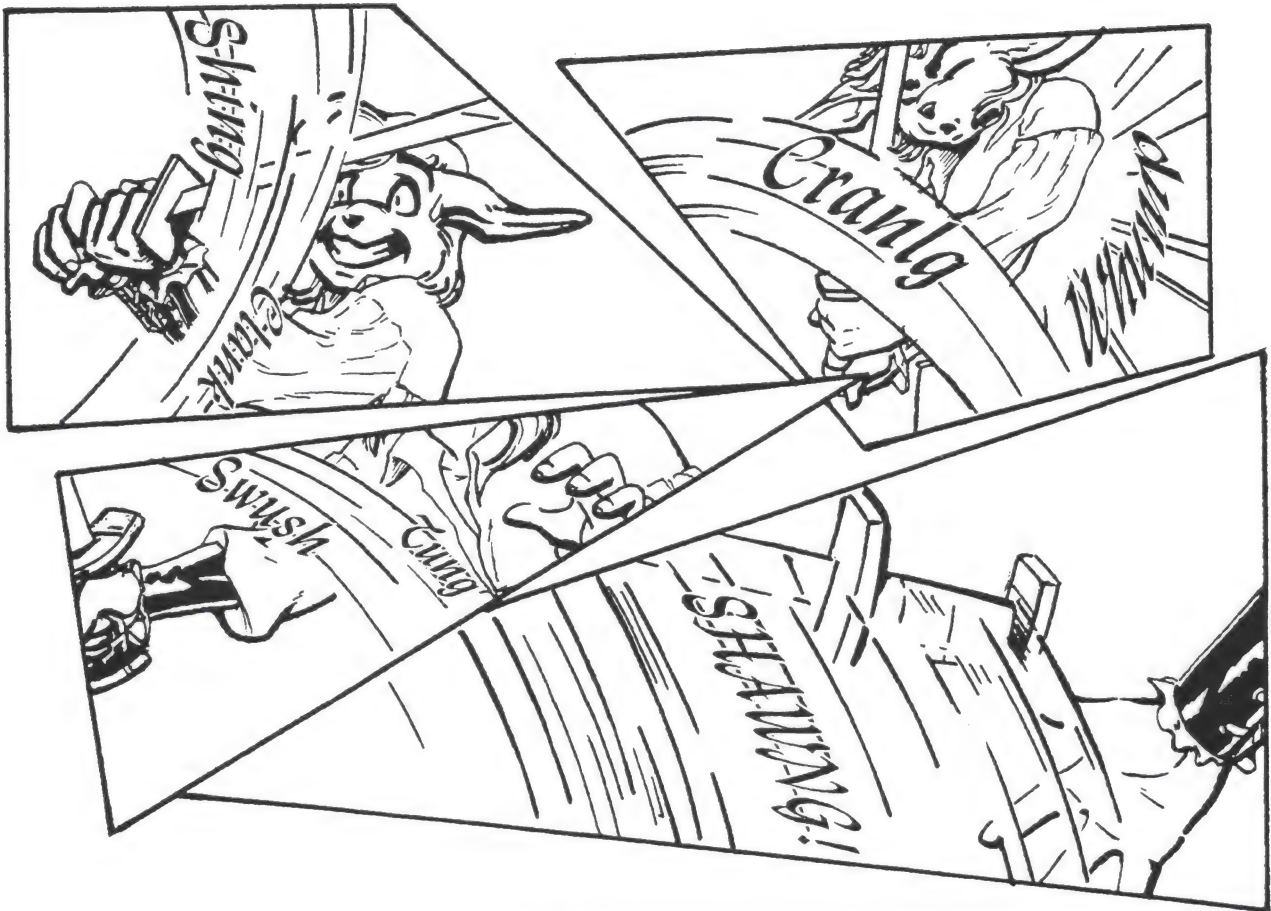
WCOTP

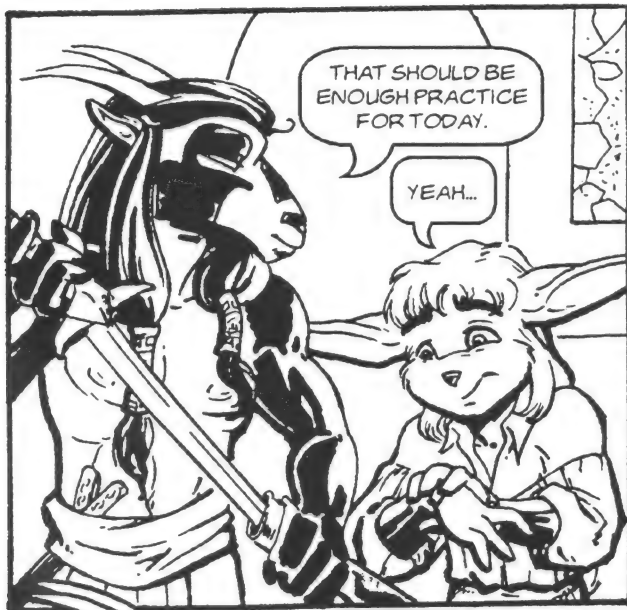
by Jim Groat





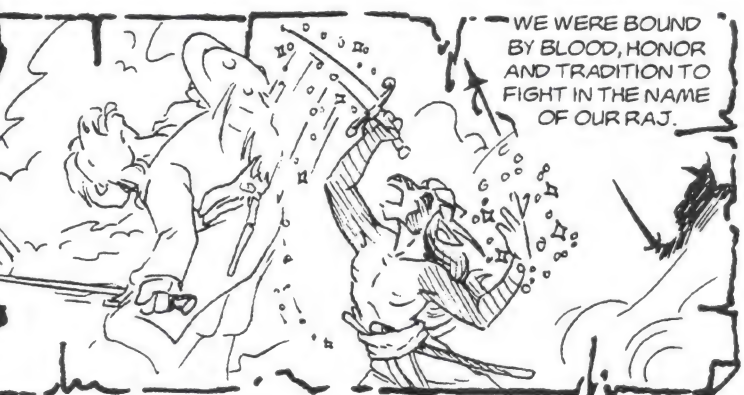
"Caribou" ©
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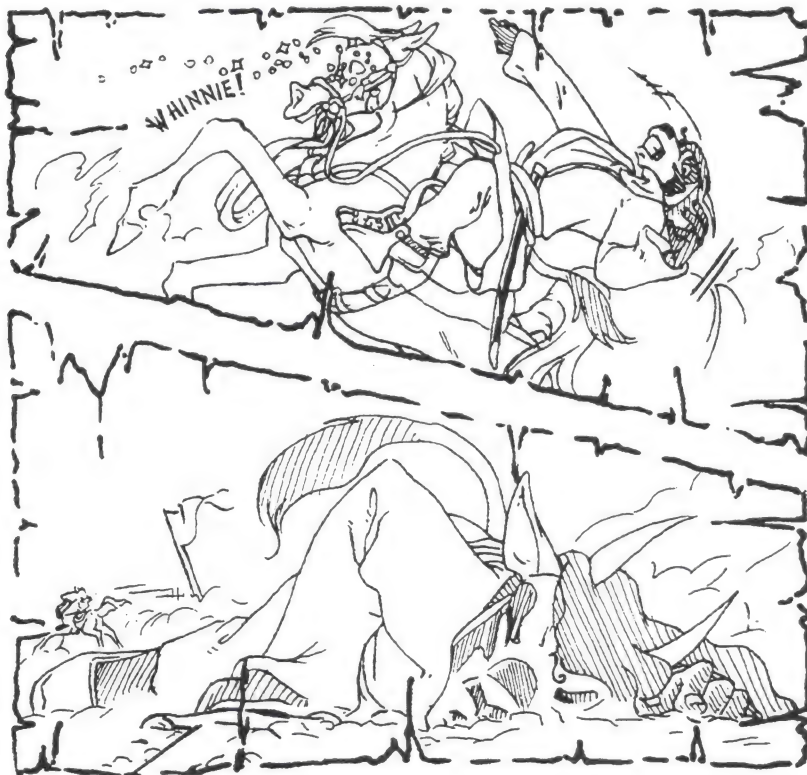
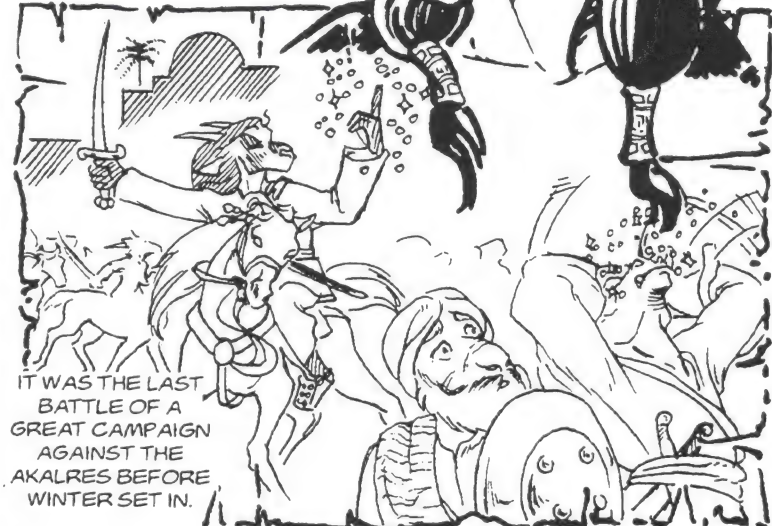
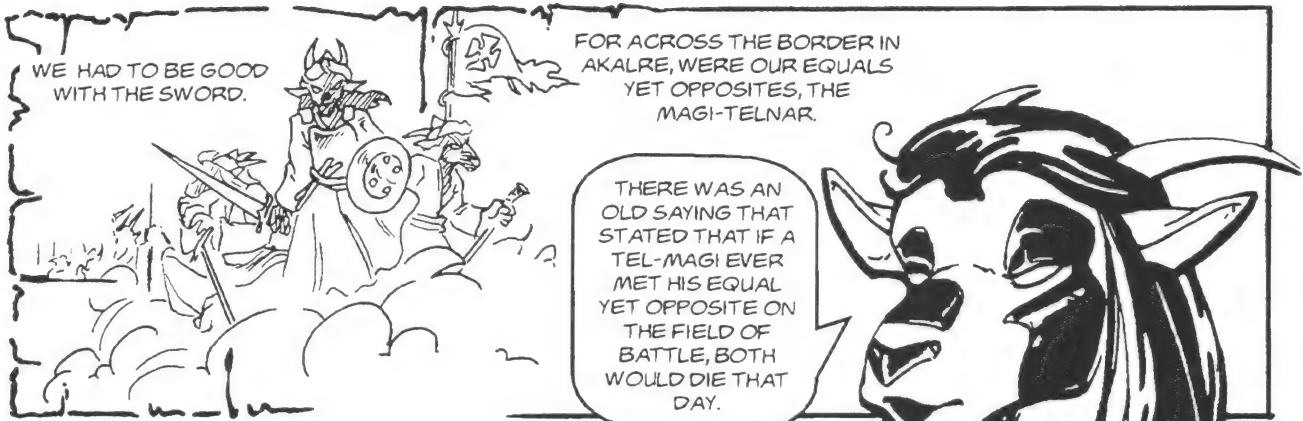


IN THE COUNTRY WHERE I COME FROM, YENESH, I WAS PART OF THE TEL-MAGI, AN ORDER OF MYSTIC KNIGHTS.

THOUGH WE MAINLY STUDIED THE MAGICAL ARTS, FOR WHICH WE WERE QUITE RENOWNED.



WE WERE BOUND BY BLOOD, HONOR AND TRADITION TO FIGHT IN THE NAME OF OUR RAJ.

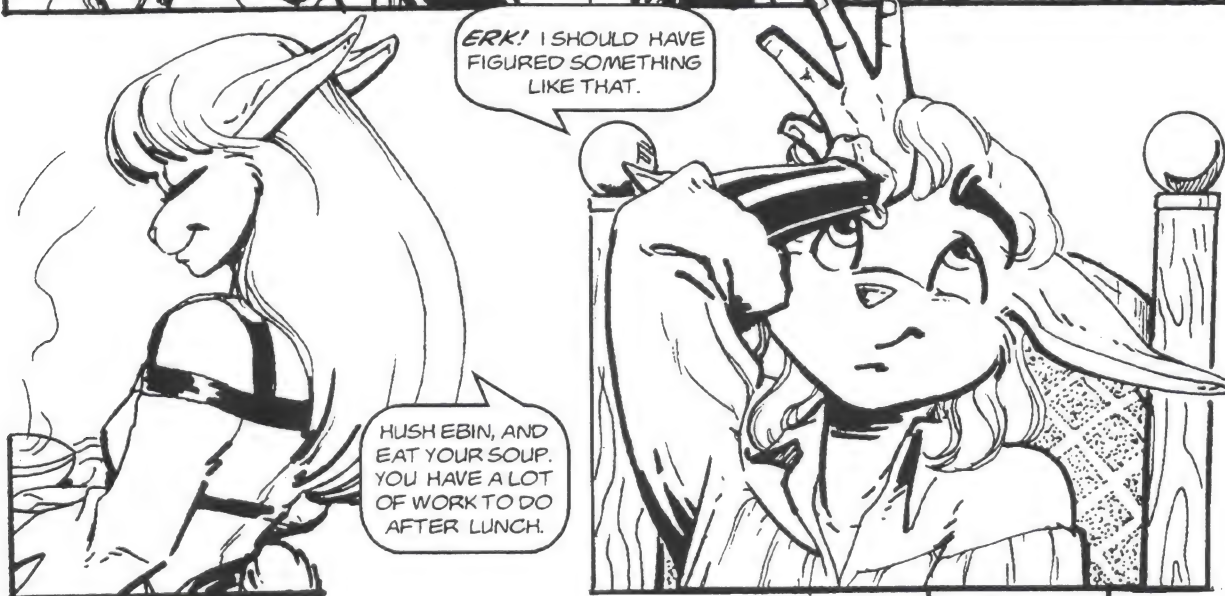




IT WAS THEN I WAS
OVERCOME WITH A
FEELING OF MY OWN
MORTALITY.

I WANTED TO
RUN BUT KNEW
I COULD NOT.

I FELT LIKE I WAS
STARING MY OWN
ANGEL OF DEATH IN
THE FACE.





"LEAN & PROUD"









STEEL Angel

Part One

Written by Gerald Perkins

Illustrated by Baron Engel

*Mary Angelus & Tom Nauer created
by Baron Engel and used with permission*

"A DATUM HAS CHANGED."

What did that mean? Mary Angelus mulled over the pronouncement of the immaterial computer the angels affectionately named "the Ghost."

Students stared as she strode down the corridor, bushy tail adding an interesting counterpoint to her walk. But they stared quietly since this was faculty turf at City Technical College of City University of New York. Outside the office of Dr. Robert J. London she switched her tail to make sure it was fully fluffed out, mentally checked that halo and wings were hidden — as well as that dratted Sword of Justice — and opened the door to meet her most recent Guardian Angel assignment.

"Hi!" she said.

Dr. London looked up from behind his secretary's desk, scowling. A brilliant smile replaced the frown as he saw Mary. He stood up, seeming to expand until he filled the tiny semi-public space. Mary looked up at the young giant: broad across the shoulders, deep chest tapering only slightly at the hips, tree-trunk legs, the whole topped by a blunt face crowned with a mop of curly black hair. Piercing green eyes looked back at her amber ones.

Mary closed her mouth. Her data said Dr. London was thirty-two years old, stood six feet six inches tall and weighed about 280 pounds. She hadn't expected him to tower over her five foot three. He certainly looked fit.

"A changeling!" he said delightedly. "Are you part of the Changeling Outreach Staten Island is running here?" He cocked his head, examining her with a boyish enthusiasm that managed not to be offensive while missing nothing of her excellent figure. "You're a fox, aren't you? An arctic fox in winter phase. Cute little buggers, but the worst thieves around camp; absolutely fearless. Oops." He ducked his head. "Pardon my manners. Come in." He pointed to the guest chair, overflowing with disks, papers and charts. "Throw that junk on the floor and have a seat. What can I do for you?"

"Um, I just brought these over." Mary held up a disk carrier.

Her clan was among the least of the Heavenly Host. Heck, she had close relatives on the other side. By default she took the form of a petite woman covered with short, silky white fur whenever she visited Earth. Her head — with mobile ears and a definite, if subdued, muzzle — and her bushy fox tail were her least human aspects. Usually she disguised herself fully when on business, but hiding the Sword took almost all the magic she could handle in corporeal form. Calling more power would make her true nature obvious to any talented person.

"Is that the new data from Ramirez?" Jack said. "Great!" He started around the desk only to stop as the computer beeped at him. He began to say something, thought better of it, and turned a helpless look on Mary.

"Now you know my secret," he said in a long-suffering tone. "The great geomancer can't get any computer fancier than a basic portable to work. Well, give me the disks. When the college sees fit to hire me a new aid, I'll look at them." He reached across the cluttered desk, taking the pack from Mary.

"Can I help?" she said.

"Can you make this obnoxious, sneering, spiteful box of impure silicon behave?"

"Gee, I'd think a geomancer could handle sand."

Jack gave her a thoughtful look, then smiled broadly.

"*Touché*. It's not the hardware, it's the perverse minds of the programmers." He stepped back as Mary rounded the credenza holding the screen and keyboard.

"Oh," she said, "they still have you using *that* e-mail program." She cleared the alarm with quick, efficient keystrokes. Two dozen message headers scrolled onto the screen. "Looks like a lot of people want to talk to you," she said.

"What did you do?" Jack said.

"Well, I just —"

"Never mind!" He tapped his fingers on the top of the display. "They have you doing deliveries? Can you

handle an office? Want a bigger stipend? You're hired!" he said all on a breath.

Mary could only nod. Did he always move at such a frantic pace?

"Good." Dr. London stuck out his hand. "I'll arrange things with admin. Since we'll be working together, it's Jack, not 'Dr. London'." He scowled in mock ferocity. "No cracks about the name, though, okay?"

• • •

The *ad hoc* band brought their version of "Women of Ireland" to a close. Three couples who had been trying to dance on the minuscule floor in front of the low stage headed for the bar, laughing. Mary set her harp in its case, then stretched.

"Don't do that to a man, lass!" Ahmad MacClarion said. Saturninely handsome, he flashed a white smile at her. Knowing how close the club could get, she wore only halter and loose white shorts. She grinned back and winked.

Ahmad put on a mock stricken expression before setting his violin aside. "Can I get you something?"

"Ginger ale," she said. "Or ginger beer if Pat has any again."

"I believe he has some Jamaican firewater."

A fluid committee of CUNY students ran the hole-in-the-wall Celtic club. With college humor, they named it the Ain't Sidhe Suite. The very mixed crowd welcomed a changeling with no more fuss than a few stares. No fuss, that is, until one night she transformed her Divine harp into an Irish lap harp and brought it to the club. Now she sat on a stool onstage whenever she came, playing with whomever showed up. Ahmad tonight, and probably Doug later to lay down some interesting percussion. If she weren't on assignment, if she were just on the mortal plane to enjoy herself, she would have been thoroughly happy.

Ahmad worked his way skillfully through the crowd. She'd seen many an Irishman dark as he and he had a true accent that he usually suppressed. How he got the given name of Ahmad was a mystery — one he guarded.

"I've never heard quite that version o' the song," he said, handing her a pint mug redolent of ginger. "Where did you hear it? Or did you write it yourself?"

"I try to keep as close to the old versions as I can," Mary said. In truth, she'd played it as she had heard it composed, letting Ahmad's fiddle play lightly around the melody. She smiled and took a swallow of her drink. Ginger filled her nose, fire filled her throat and tears ran from her eyes. Ahmad laughed as she coughed.

Mary froze, looking at the door. Patrons, sensing something happening, turned to stare at the stranger.

A little over six feet tall, lean, he moved with an easy grace that bespoke physical power. The changeling's

hair and white fur — where it stuck out of his field jacket sleeves and worn, too-short jeans above workman's boots that had never seen a shine — had the near violet undertones of a Russian blue fox. He elbowed his way to the bar, slapping down crumpled bills as he ordered a beer. His T-shirt advertised "The Slicker Slickers".

"Tom!" Mary said. "What are you doing here?"

The changeling looked up from his drink, toothy smile erasing his sullen cast.

"Mary! I heard the music and stopped for a drink." He strode to the low band platform, beer in hand. He bent forward to touch noses and rub cheeks with her. "Should have known I'd find you here."

She wrinkled her nose at his unwashed smell.

"Now," said Ahmad from his stool, "if ye can dance as well as Mary plays, we'll have a bit o' a show."

Tom scowled at the fiddler. "What makes you think I would if I could?"

Mary gave a very unladylike snort.

Ahmad smiled and gently stroked the bow across the violin strings.

Mary took a position facing Tom, hands on hips, grinning.

Right toe, left toe, cross right over left, hop, keep arms down. Mary improvised to Ahmad's slow reel.

Tom scowled, then imitated her.

Right, left, cross over, hop, hop right, hop left. Tom's boots rapped the ancient wooden floor while Mary's bare feet made a gentle slapping sound. Up, down, touch elbows and circle, eyes fixed on one another. Turn to face the crowd. Synchronize steps until two danced as one. Mary let the magic of the music and Tom's wrap her in a warm glow.

Ahmad brought the reel to a close.

Tom bowed ironically to the applauding crowd.

A young Buddha sailed with serene arrogance through the crowd.

"Hi, foxies," Doug said as he pushed past them to his drums.

"Easy," Mary said, grabbing Tom's coat before he jumped up on the stage. "Doug insults everyone."

Ahmad began a jig.

Mary hopped up onto her stool, picking up her harp.

Tom looked around; glared at the audience.

Mary smiled sweetly.

"Well, the back o' my hand to you," Tom growled. He shucked his jacket even as he turned to face the patrons. He danced, working the thud of his boots into Ahmad's

lead and Mary's counterpoint. Doug came in very gently as Tom danced toe to toe, turning what should have been low hops into effortless leaps.

Suddenly Doug rapped out a complex riff.

Tom stopped dead.

Ahmad switched instantly to a slow fill. Mary dropped silver notes into the silence. The bar patrons leaned forward.

"No you don't," Tom said.

Doug repeated the pattern.

Tom looked from Mary to Ahmad and over his shoulder at the crowd. He made as though to leave, but he couldn't keep his snarl from turning to a broad grin.

"Well, ccess to you, then," he said.

He faced the front of the bar and repeated Doug's riff exactly. Doug replied with a variation. Ahmad began a hornpipe. Mary sent bright sounds dancing all around his.

Tom took the whole floor, using his body to carry on a conversation with the musicians, inviting the watchers to join in. And they did, some beating time on the rickety tables, others nodding, and yet others merely watching, entranced.

"Now he does what he loves."

Mary looked from Tom to Ahmad.

The fiddler picked up the tempo still more.

Tom stood, back straight and shoulders steady, arms barely moving as he picked the essential beat out of the dance with his feet. Now Doug followed rather than led.

"He gets what he wants, for they love him." Ahmad never looked away from Tom. "An' he loves them, though blessed if I know why." He rolled his eyes to glance at Mary, then back to follow Tom. His face smoothed as he poured his all into the music.

Mary felt the power roll from Ahmad. It filled the Ain't Sidhe Suite, holding the patrons, Doug, herself, and especially Tom in its strength.

"Enough," Tom said. "Enough!"

Mary saw that he was gasping for air, that his fur lay plastered to his skin, yet he danced. She deliberately broke the rhythm — not by much, that could be dangerous.

Ahmad shivered, became aware of his surroundings again, and swiftly, smoothly, brought the piece to an end. Face impassive, he gave a half-bow to Tom, then put his violin in its case.

The crowd exploded with applause, cheers, whistles, all of which Tom ignored as he stood panting.

Mary jumped off the stage to support Tom, who gently sipped a glass of cold water someone brought him. When she turned around, Ahmad and Doug had vanished. She quickly threw her harp in its carrying bag. Tom leaned against her as they made their way into the night.

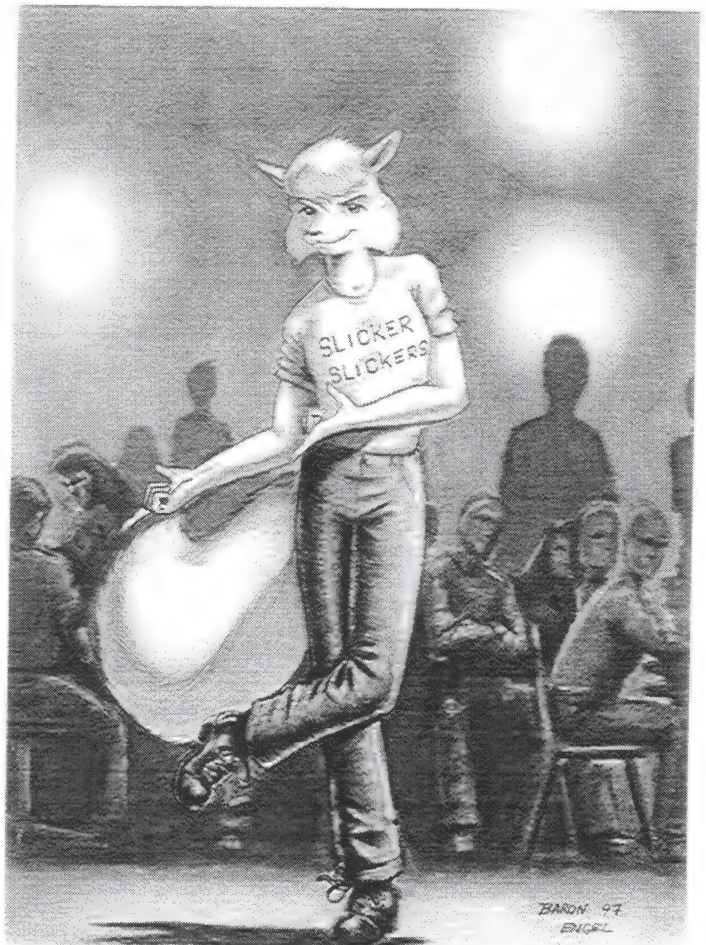
• • •

"That man has power," Tom said. He leaned forward on the futon that doubled as couch and bed in Mary's tiny one-room apartment in the NOHO district. "But he keeps it circling back on itself in his music — deliberately, as far as I can tell. Wonder why."

"I don't know." Mary set her harp case down at the far end of the couch. "He's a very private person, but I sense no evil."

"Me either." Tom rubbed his feet and ankles where his boots had chafed. Boots and jacket lay in a pile on the floor just inside the door on the opposite side of the room, next to Mary's sandals.

"Oh, go ahead and heal them," she said, rummaging in a drawer of the particle-board wardrobe that stood between equally cheap secretary desk and the outer wall. A compact kitchen unit filled most of the hall-side wall as the couch did the street side of the efficiency apartment.



"I am," Tom said, "but gently. I don't want any obvious magic associated with me. That man has power," he said again, "power enough to make an angel dance on the head of a pin."

Mary blew him a weak raspberry. She needed stronger lips and a thicker tongue to produce a good one, but Tom grinned and leaned over to tug gently on her tail.

"Hey!" she said, standing. She held up three flat brushes. "You want a grooming or not?"

Tom stood up to remove his clothes, then lay back down on his stomach.

"What brings you to earth?" he asked. He grunted in pleasure as Mary attacked him with a brush.

"Guardian assignment." Mary drew the brush down his back, revealing for a moment the odd muscles needed for the physical aspect of Angelic wings in the mortal plane. "Jack London, a big-name geomancer. He knows more about how the guts of earth work than any man living."

"Interesting. Why does he need guarding? Ow!" Tom said as his left calf muscle cramped. "Ah, better," as she worked out the tension with her fingers.

"I don't know." Mary selected a thinner brush to work on his tail. She loved the soft fullness and the sheen once she got the dirt out. She set the brush aside. Sometimes, she thought as she began to work on the tight muscles of his shoulders, Tom cared too much for humans; enough to take on their physical symptoms.

"My Archangel didn't say much," she said. "He did issue me a Sword."

She leaned on his shoulders as Tom tried to sit up. He relaxed after a moment.

"What kind?" he said.

"Justice."

"Mmph. Did he say why?"

"No." And that bothered Mary. Secretary angels on guardian duty did not carry Swords.

"Fits. Tell me about your assignment."

"Roll over." Mary worked on Tom's front as she told what she had learned about Jack. "I can't see why he needs protection. He's so rich for his lifestyle that I can't see him being bribed. I think he takes money mostly because people wouldn't listen if he gave free advice. He loves his teaching work, too."

"Sounds like a saint."

"Oh, he enjoys certain, hmm, 'earthy' pleasures. With his looks and wealth he has women fighting for his attention." And he had an attraction even she felt, though he had never made any kind of proposition in the month she had worked for him.

"Your turn," Tom said, sitting up.

Mary started to dematerialize her top and shorts, then made a point of removing them physically. Tom rolled his eyes. His shed fur covered the dark blue futon. Mary inhaled his scent as she stretched out.

"Nothing odd?" Tom said, drawing the brush down her back.

"Only in that he treats them honorably and hasn't made any of them pregnant."

Tom swatted her haunch with the brush.

"Geomancy is a little out of my knowledge, Tom. The Ghost has been helping, but the only thing the least bit out of place is a project he's working on."

"Oh?" Tom began working on her calves.

"About five years ago, he began paying particular attention to the asthenosphere — that's the plastic layer between solid continents and solid core — below New England, southern France and Spain. If he's reached any conclusions, he hasn't written them down."

"Just under the continents? Nothing about the Atlantic floor?"

"No. And before you ask, I haven't been able to find anything in the Ghost's databanks." Mary didn't have Tom's status, but she could winkle data from the Ghost better than angels much further up the hierarchy.

"Huh!" Tom finished with her feet.

She rolled over, trying not to undo the work he'd done on her tail. "So what brings you to earth, love?"

"General surveillance."

"Huh?"

Tom grinned as he pinned her in turn.

"You haven't had an assignment like that for a century," she said.

"Yeah." Tom let go of her shoulders. He drew a very soft brush over her breasts and down her belly. She let herself enjoy the sensation. Lovemaking tonight? That unique instant when mortals could, if they were attuned, nearly join souls? No, the Sword bothered her and his assignment clearly bothered Tom.

Tom received . . . difficult assignments. Sometimes, she was sure, he crossed the line — dissipated a demon, even killed a particularly evil mortal — yet remained undamned. His dark moods and secretiveness could drive her to distraction, but not shake the love of an immortal. She scratched gently behind his ear and under his chin.

"Talk."

His mouth quirked with a stillborn smile. "The Ghost said, 'A datum has changed'."

"That's it? I already knew that."

"Uh, huh. And the hierarchy up to the Thrones, and their equivalents on the other side, went into spasms. Then — nothing." Tom worked on her legs with vigorous strokes. "The Archangels have to make a show, of course, so nearly every available angel is chasing specters."

"What 'datum'?"

"The Ghost won't say. Or can't say."

"That's really weird." A tiny shiver ran through her core.

"Yeah." Tom shrugged and grinned. "But New York is one of the best places to look. There's so much magic loose in this city that the administration has more high-powered sorcerers than most national governments just to keep technology running. Nearly anything could hide in that much magical mist."

"If the city is misty, then the college is a cloud bank." Mary mimed peering through dense fog as she sat up. "All those kids feeling their oats."

That probably explained the Ghost's cryptic message. Unless someone looked, it *didn't* know what had changed. But she still felt uneasy.

• • •

"It is far too nice a day — evening, really — for you to spend with your nose glued to the screen," Jack said. Mary looked up, seeing that the office lighting had come on automatically. "Scoot."

"Thanks," Mary said. "I finished your proposal for the Panama study."

Keeping up the appearance of a full-time student took more of her time than she liked. And working with the outreach program for the roughly two percent changeling population took even more.

She couldn't lie. The Ghost saw to slipping real gold into the system to cover the electronic misdirection that paid her tuition and most of her rent. Still, she needed to be a student.

"I've been catching up on homework. You don't mind, do you?"

"Heavens, no! I wouldn't force anyone into the Pits." Jack entered his private office, leaving the door open. Mary grinned at the reference to the college-provided student computer centers.

"What are you doing two weeks from Friday night?" he called. His shoes thumped against the wall as he kicked them off.

"Probably playing at the club, why?"

"I have to attend a dinner at the Indian Ambassador's home. Some sort of an award ceremony. A formal dinner

there pretty much requires I have someone on my arm." He came back to the doorway, sorting a handful of printouts. "I helped find a safe site for a nuclear power plant, and a place to put it when it's useless." An odd expression, part sadness, part something else, passed over his face as he looked up from the printouts.

"Why me?" Mary studied Jack, not quite sure she'd seen anything unusual.

Jack smiled, tapping the papers with one finger. "One: you handle yourself well. Two: they have a great respect for changelings; something to do with their religion. Three: you haven't tried to get me into bed."

Mary hoped she looked as startled as she felt.

"It seems half the available student population and some of the faculty want to 'flat dance' with me." He produced a rueful smile. "I enjoy the exercise, but the mental and moral quality of my partners . . ." He put on a such a lugubrious expression that Mary had to laugh.

"But I don't have anything to wear," she said.

"Oh . . . yeah." Jack shrugged. "Well, we can take care of that." He padded back into his office.

• • •

Jack sent her to a tailor who didn't blink at the challenge. She left after being fitted for an amber pantsuit outfit with low-cut sleeveless blouse and matching jacket of real silk two shades darker than her eyes. Cut to show off her figure without rubbing her fur uncomfortably, the material had been treated to prevent static buildup. Gold sandals and amber and beryl jewelry completed the effect. Jack's eyes widened appreciatively when she stepped from the cab at his house.

A tiger changeling in turban, open vest, and pantaloons bowed them into the ambassador's residence. Mary made small talk until dinner. By her estimation several countries and a number of charities who did real work would lose their best people if anything happened to the gathering. She saw the security when she looked. Dinner consisted of Indian dishes she hadn't tasted in a century, prepared by a master chef. Ambassador Rajit Patel presented Jack with a medal "with the thanks of the Indian people" in a brief, low-key ceremony. The crowd departed near midnight.

Jack, Mary, and the ambassador retired to the study. Two large hassocks and two old-fashioned wing chairs had been set for conversation. Books lined one of the walls, wood paneling the other. Mary inhaled the remnants of delicate sandalwood incense as she took one of the hassocks. The tiger entered, poured excellent Scotch all around, then joined them.

"Jack, the people of India owe you more than we can ever repay," the ambassador said once they were all settled. "If we had built the station where we had originally planned . . ."

"Rajit," Jack said quietly, "you need the power. I don't need the money. Nothing may happen at the original site, but I feel strongly that the least seismic activity will split that seam soft rock. It *probably* won't reach the surface. On the other hand, now you can drop a mountain on the plant when you're done with it and have a decent roadbed as well." He sipped his drink. "Thanks for not mentioning my fee."

"Lack of fee, you mean," rumbled the tiger. "Would you introduce me to your lovely companion?"

"Kirti Rasmanujan, Mary Angelus. Mary, Kirti."

"Welcome, oh favored of the gods. You impressed the guests. You delighted the ambassador's wife with your talk of Celtic and Indian folk music. It is a long-time interest of hers."

"She plays at a hole-in-the-wall club called the Ain't Sidhe Suite," Jack said.

The ambassador chuckled. Mary watched the tiger running the English possibilities through his mind.

"Ho!" he said, leaning back. "Truly? Do you suppose I could fit in?"

"Only if Pat threw out half the customers," Mary said.



"Such are the exigencies of size." The guard sighed, but his eyes twinkled.

"Tell me about it, Kirti," Jack said, commiserating.

"You wonder how it is that we are familiar?" Kirti said to Mary. "He wandered off while feeling the rock beneath. He was tossing bandits over a wall when I found him." He turned to Jack. "Did I tell you, that was the wall of the local constabulary?"

Mary and the ambassador burst out laughing at Jack's furious blush. To hide his embarrassment, Jack thumbed on a data slate lying on the table next to him.

His flush deepened, then fled, leaving him white and furious. He scanned the news story there, then set the slate down very carefully. "Damn them!" he said quietly.

"Who?" Mary asked.

"The vampires," Jack said. He tapped the slate. "NYPD busted a vamp safe house; gambling, prostitutes, drugs. All they got was small fry." He made a cutting motion, his movement so violent that the chair creaked in protest.

"Heaven and Hell have been at war since the beginning and humans are their proxies, their puppets; we suffer the collateral damage. Not a damned thing we can do about it. But the vampires, they were human and neither side will do anything about them. I'd give everything I have to be free of the lot of them!"

"Do you really believe in the Divine War?" Mary asked in the silence.

She shuddered. Heaven and Hell loathed vampires. Born of souls that would normally be damned, they gathered power by leeching from others until they were physically immortal — and quite insane. The great ones were too powerful for the usual agents and neither side would allow the other to break the fraying Compact that left mortals to their own redemption or damnation. So vampires took over the criminal organizations of the world and thumbed their noses.

"Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva continue the cycle," Ambassador Patel said, "of creation, preservation, and destruction so the cycle can begin again. But these vampires seem to be the servants of Kali."

Jack said nothing; then or in the ambassador's limousine that dropped Mary at her apartment building.

• • •

"Want to go on a camping trip?" Jack said.

Mary looked up from the anatomy diagram on her data slate. She stood up and stretched out the kinks from sitting too long.

"Oh, don't do that!" he said, looking away exaggeratedly.

Mary laughed, thinking of Ahmad saying the same thing. She did enjoy her physical body. Ah, ah, Mary, she thought, business!

"I need to do some more delving," Jack said. "The White Mountains of New Hampshire are beautiful in the fall. You've been spending all your time in class or in the office. I thought you might like to get some fresh air." He shrugged. "I won't be much company. If you think you'd be bored..."

The mountains *were* lovely in their brilliant year-end colors. Jack hiked the trails, silent and barefoot, or sat lotus in the clearing where they pitched their tents. Mary explored during the day and played her harp for Jack in the evening. A tiny earthquake the second day startled her.

"Nothing unusual," Jack said. "Just not common." He kept silent during the trip back, unwilling to share what he found. He did not download his portable into the office computer.

They made one more field trip before winter set in. When Jack flew to Sarajevo for a conference of geologists and geomancers, Mary followed in spirit form, thinking of her time as Hindu air spirit. The proceedings were exceedingly dull.

Winter arrived, grim and gray as only winter in New York City can be. Mary split her time among classes, the Ain't Sidhe Suite, Jack's office, and her apartment.

A Richter 5.0 quake struck New England the day before Christmas. Hundreds died as buildings never designed for that kind of stress failed. Thirty died when an overpass in Syracuse crumbled.

New York City, with typical parochialism, ignored the event. Residents of the five boroughs were more concerned with the continuing activity of what the newsnets called the "Master Vampire of New York". When two CUNY students she knew were taken, Mary requested permission to investigate. Her Archangel refused.

• • •

Tom arrived one evening on the heels of a sleet storm. He looked the same except that his T-shirt now advertised "The Vampire Slaves" and his body reflected his weary spirit.

"Bleah!" he said, leaving his coat and boots by the door. "Only Earth could be this unpredictably foul." He curled up on the couch while Mary prepared cocoa. "On the other hand," he said as he inhaled the fragrant steam, "I could forgive it for chocolate."

Mary laughed, snuggling up beside him. She reached into the place where Tom hid his Divine attributes and gently stroked his halo. His body shuddered in pleasure. He set down his cocoa. Sleet rattled against the window. Warm silence filled Mary's tiny apartment, the winter darkness relieved by two faint golden glows.

"Mary, you are a balm for the spirit," Tom said later. Mary smiled and drew a bright arpeggio from her harp. Outside an emergency vehicle howled down the street. Tom grinned crookedly.

"I wish I knew why Jack needs a guardian." Mary made her harp question. "I can run rings around my Archangel in the Ghost, but I don't see any threat to Jack."

"Me neither," Tom said.

Mary looked up from her harp. "You looked?"

"Of course, love." Tom touched her cheek ruff gently. "Something has Upstairs disturbed. The vampires are more active than they've been since the magic returned. Someone with an intuition — or data at a higher security level than we have — thinks Jack needs guarding. Of course I looked. But, shy of processing at death by the Ghost and the Infernal Goblin, all we have on Jack is public knowledge and your reports."

Mary stilled her harp and looked up at Tom's blocky features. "Jack hates vampires," she said.

"He should." Tom looked away, suddenly tense. "I think the Master Vampires and Hell are in league. Did you hear about the mass sacrifices in Indonesia?" Mary shook her head. "Nasty. Then the earth opened and swallowed a couple of Indian villages." He snorted. "The Indian government was going to put a nuclear plant there."

"Things are happening all around the world. Usually nothing big, you understand — just barely above the noise of normal life on the mortal plane — but *my* intuition says it centers on New York." Tom got up and paced the cramped room.

"Watch your charge closely, Mary," he said. "He's a good man. But don't fall in love with him; don't lose your objectivity."

• • •

"It's been a pleasure talking with you, Hubert." Jack's booming voice carried around the open door between offices. "I wouldn't worry about the Portugal quakes. They're relieving the unusual stress lines we talked about at Sarajevo. Yes, good-bye."

Jack opened the door fully.

"Mary, I need your help."

Mary looked up from scheduling another lecture. "What's up?" she said.

"My private project is bearing fruit. I need your help to make the computer analyze my data."

"You mean the field trips weren't one of your contracts?"

"No." Jack glanced away and back. For a moment, his eyes turned dark, haunted. "Um, would you come out to my house this evening?"

• • •

"I didn't know exactly what I was looking for," Jack said. His feet thumped on the wooden stairs leading to the basement of his home. "I certainly didn't expect to get results so fast."

The basement had been renovated along with the rest of the building. Cool fluorescent lights made bright the tile floor and the shelves lining the walls. Two large tables sat three feet apart toward the back of the room. Rock samples filled both, making two parts of a broken circle. Jack strode directly to a door in the back wall. Mary touched one of the samples. What? She pulled back her hand, surprised by the very strange magic she felt.

"Come on." Jack stepped into the tiny room beyond, ducking his head to avoid the door lintel.

A Wintel-Cray standalone computer occupied a standard business workstation. High-capacity batteries filled most of the rest of the room except for three filing cabinets and a box from which cool air issued. Jack pulled a chemical light from one file drawer, activated it, and hung it above the desk.

While Mary stared at the most computing power she'd seen on earth, Jack closed the door. He muttered a phrase and a pulse of magical energy ran through the walls. Mary spun around.



"There, we have privacy from Heaven, Hell, and all things between," Jack said. He stopped, looking at her expression. He gestured at the fan unit. "Don't worry," he said, "that's a submarine air unit, good for a month."

The prickly chair fabric thrust tiny fibers through Mary's fur as she sat. She touched the power switch.

"No security?" she said, staring at the welcome message on the screen.

"Any material attempt strong enough to break in would destroy everything in here," Jack said. "And nothing short of a concerted attack from the spirit realms can penetrate my barriers. If *they* think it's worth the trouble, I'll be standing judgment in seconds."

Mary looked up at him. She asked the question with her face.

"Wait," Jack said. He vibrated with tension, but his voice sounded weary. "Please, just wait. All my data is in here." He started to pat the computer, then pulled his hand back. He smiled wryly.

"What do you want me to do with it?" Mary said.

"Why, make maps, of course."

Mary threw out the unnecessary programs Jack had put on the computer. Then she set to work. The readout in the corner showed 3:17 AM by the time she finished collating data.

"What is it?" she said.

"What does it look like?" Jack unfolded from the lotus position he had assumed on the floor.

"Well, it's a map of North America and Europe where they fit together when Pangea was whole." Mary traced two arcs of red points overlaying the ordinary topographic map with her finger. "And this thing? It looks like a huge circle — not quite a thousand miles across if it was whole — that runs out to sea on both sides, but it's broken. The Mid-Atlantic Rise is in the way."

"Right. Now look at the figures."

"Powers! It's deep! It's *floating* in the magma, with only about a third in the lithosphere."

She jerked around in her chair and squeaked as she rolled over her tail. She stared him, ears pricked, nostrils wide.

Jack looked down at her, at once grim and triumphant.

"That," he said quietly, "may be the most dangerous construct in the universe."



(To be continued)





KARENA ©1996
KLIEFOTH



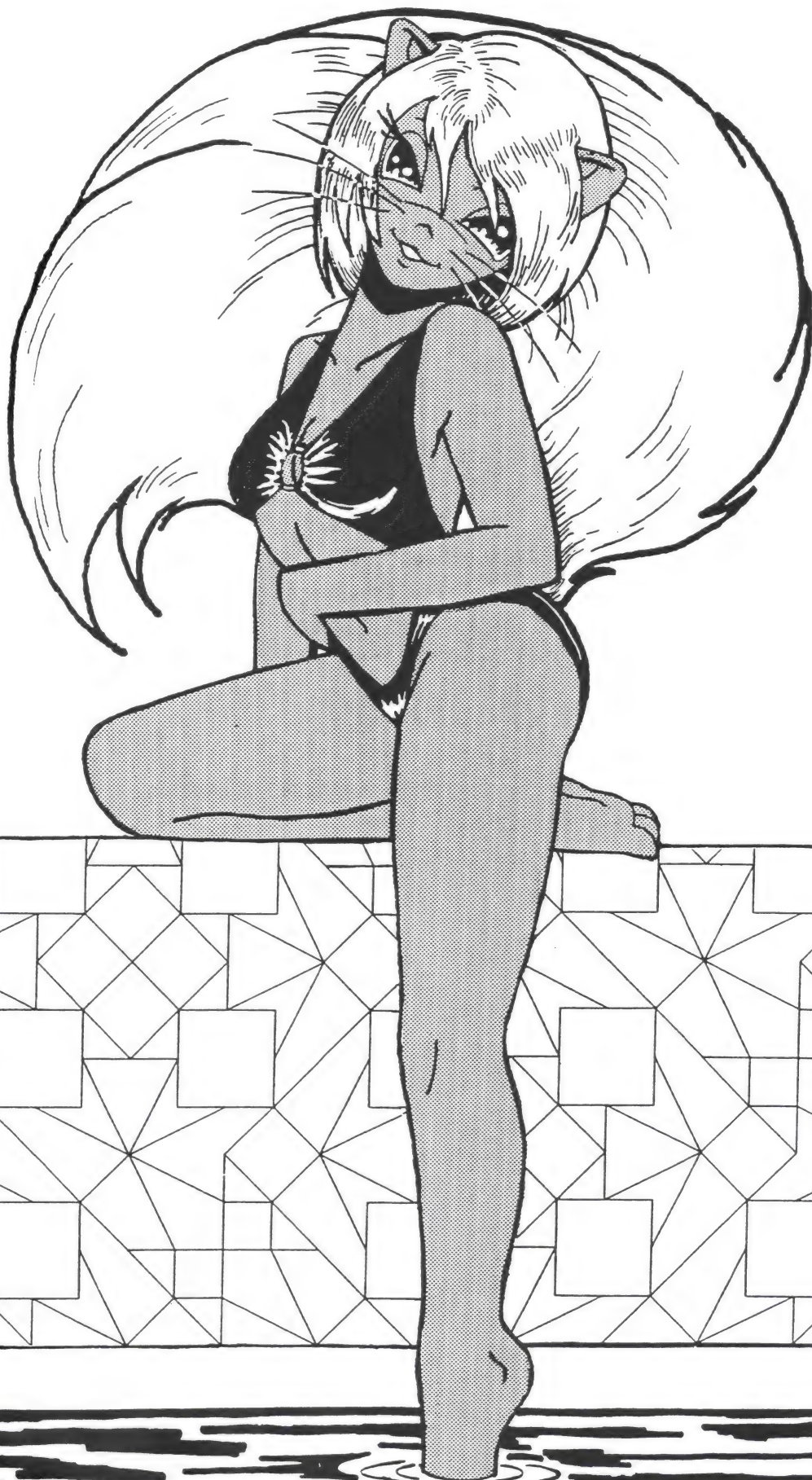


"Bosom Buddies"
©1997 Mark Freid



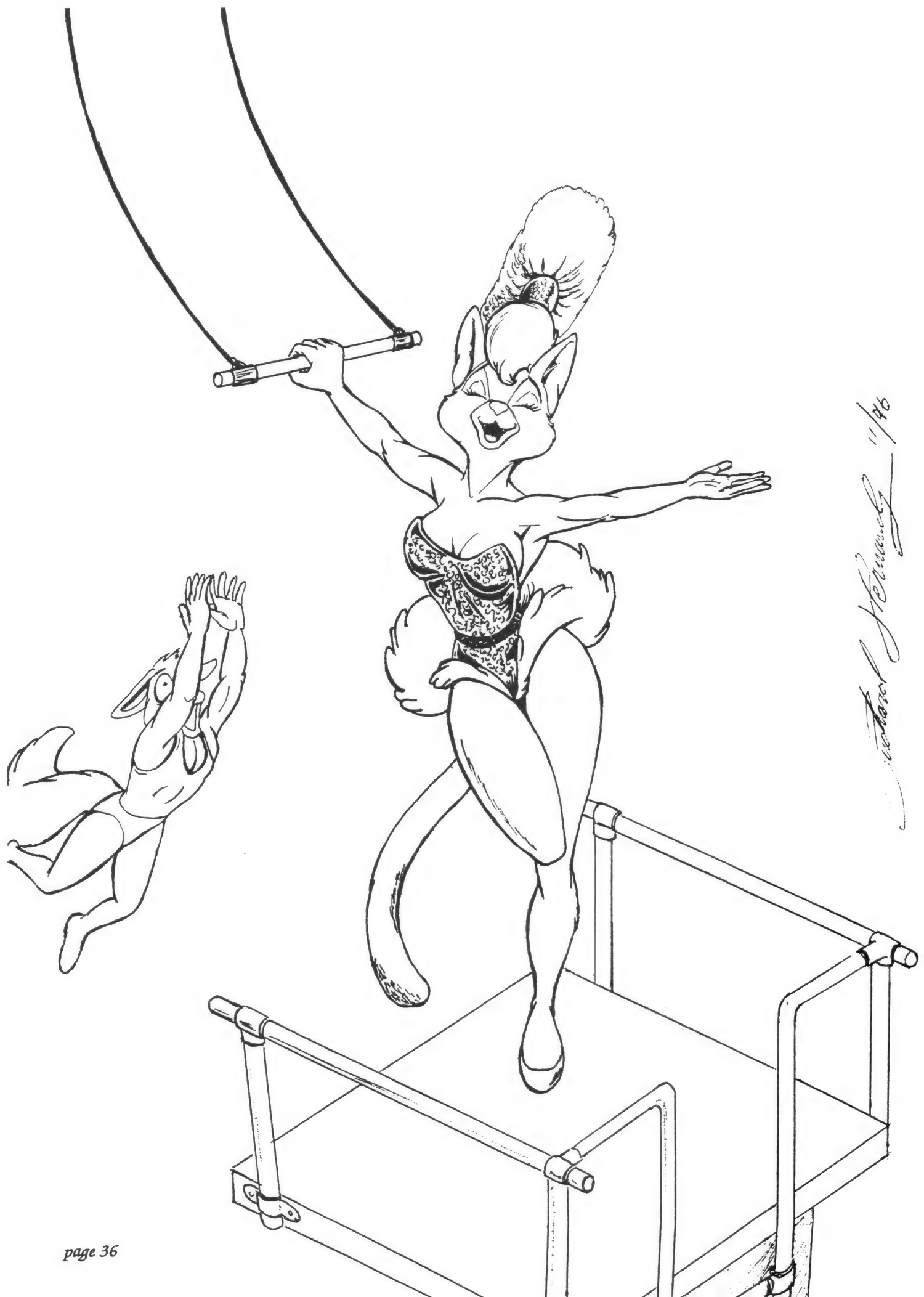






Linnea

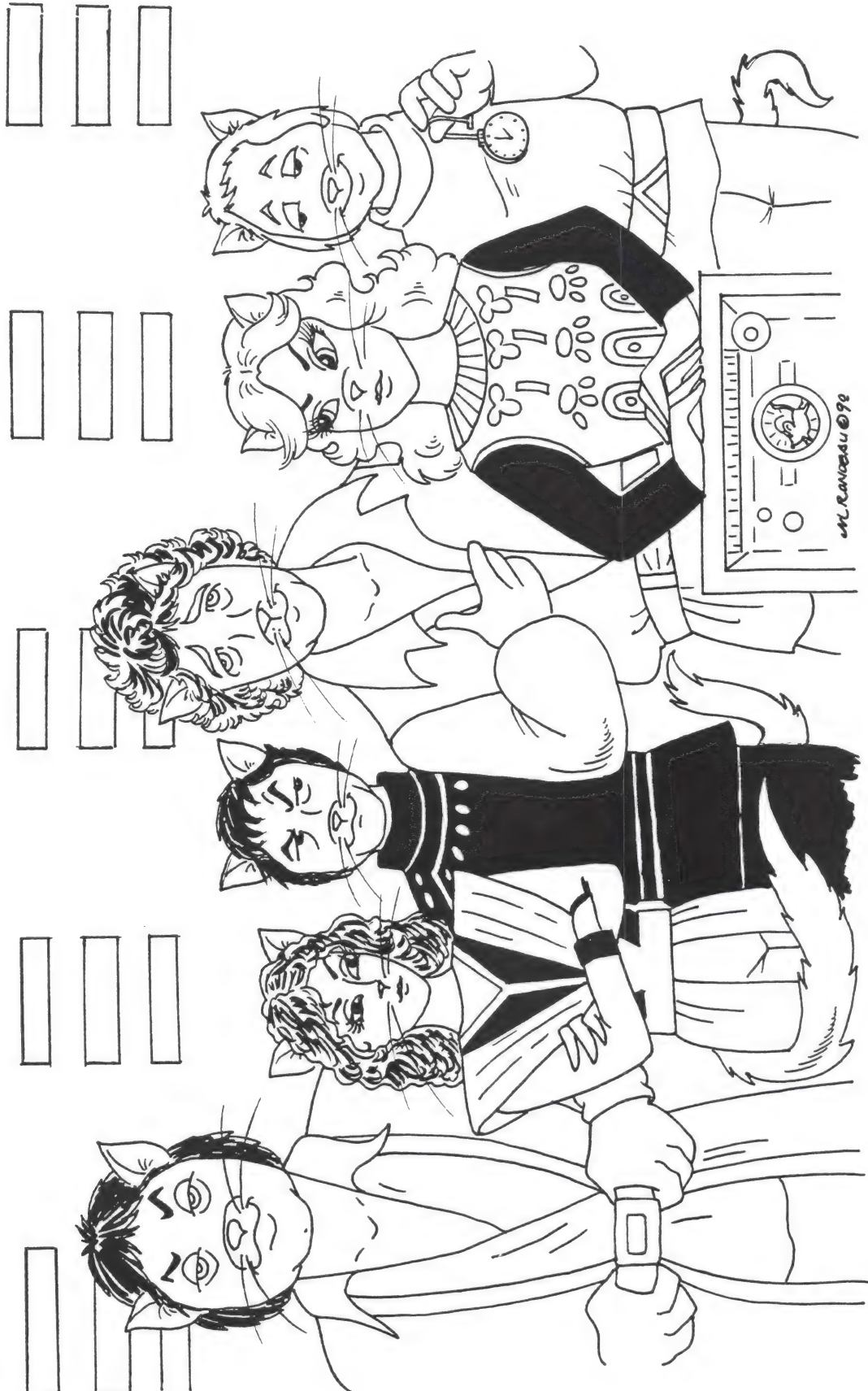
PHIL 92











"CREW OF THE LIB-PURR-ATOR"



Kitty
Strong
Baboon
Dunk
Batz © 1997 Ken Mitchem



C.S.A. CAVALRY

-NIGHT FALL-

IT WAS ONLY MANY MILES UP THE SNOWY TRAIL THAT SOMETHING— EITHER MY OWN COLD FUR, OR THE SUFFERING OF MY COMPANIONS, OR SIMPLY THE BLESSED DISTANCE FROM THE INN AND RED THAT BROUGHT ME TO MY SENSES, AND WE STOPPED.

KETTJARA

PART SEVEN



ARE THERE ANY MORE ALONG THIS ROAD?

IF WE CAN FIND THEM.



I'LL GET IN AND START A FIRE.

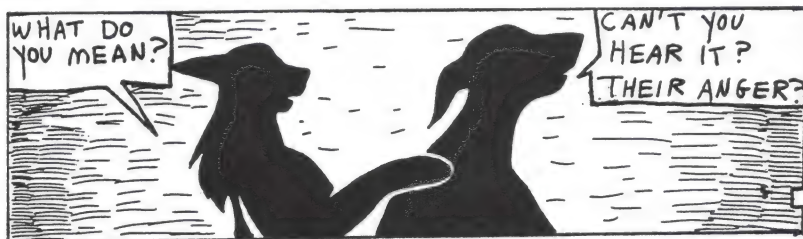
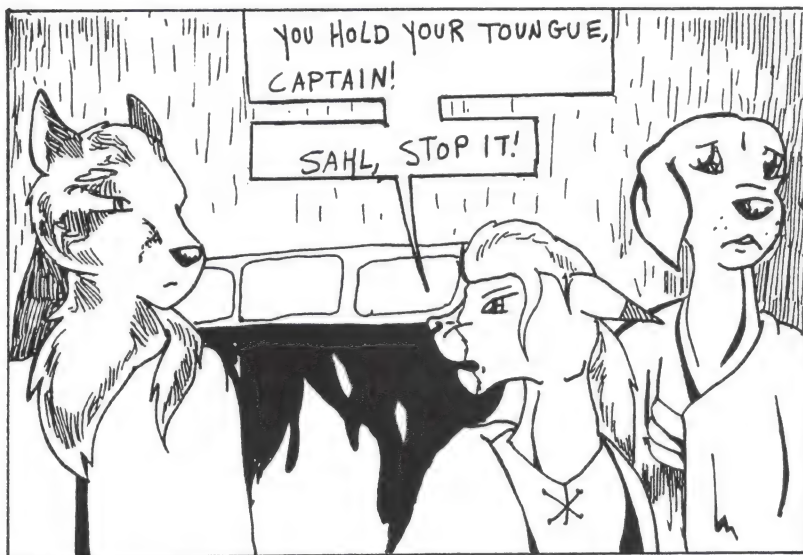
I'LL GET THE LIZARDS STABLED SO THE ROTTED THINGS DON'T FREEZE. YOU SHORT- HAIRS GET INSIDE.

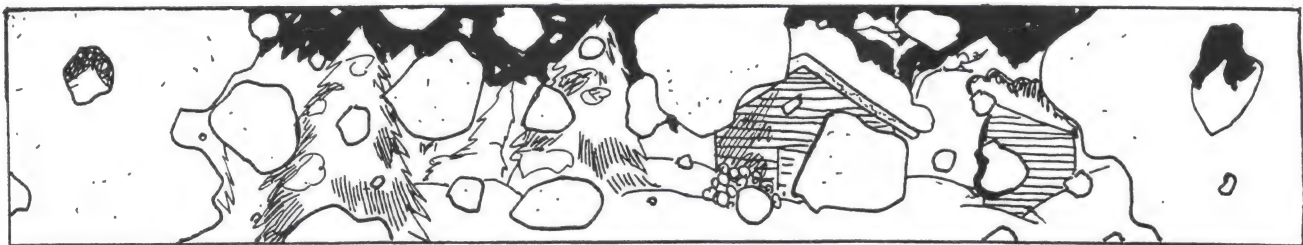
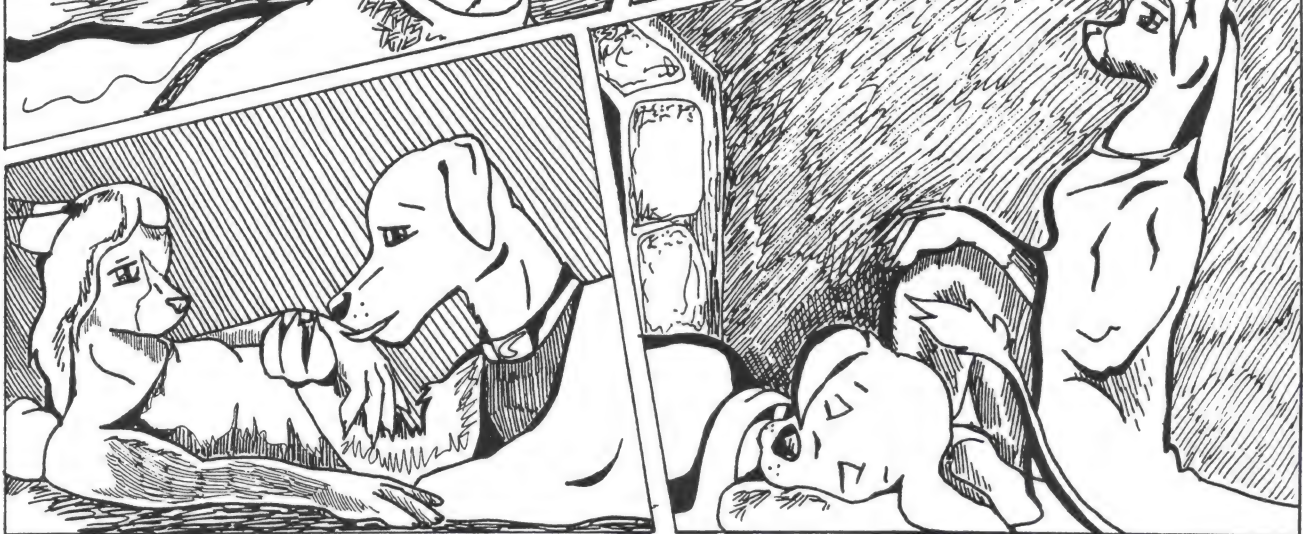
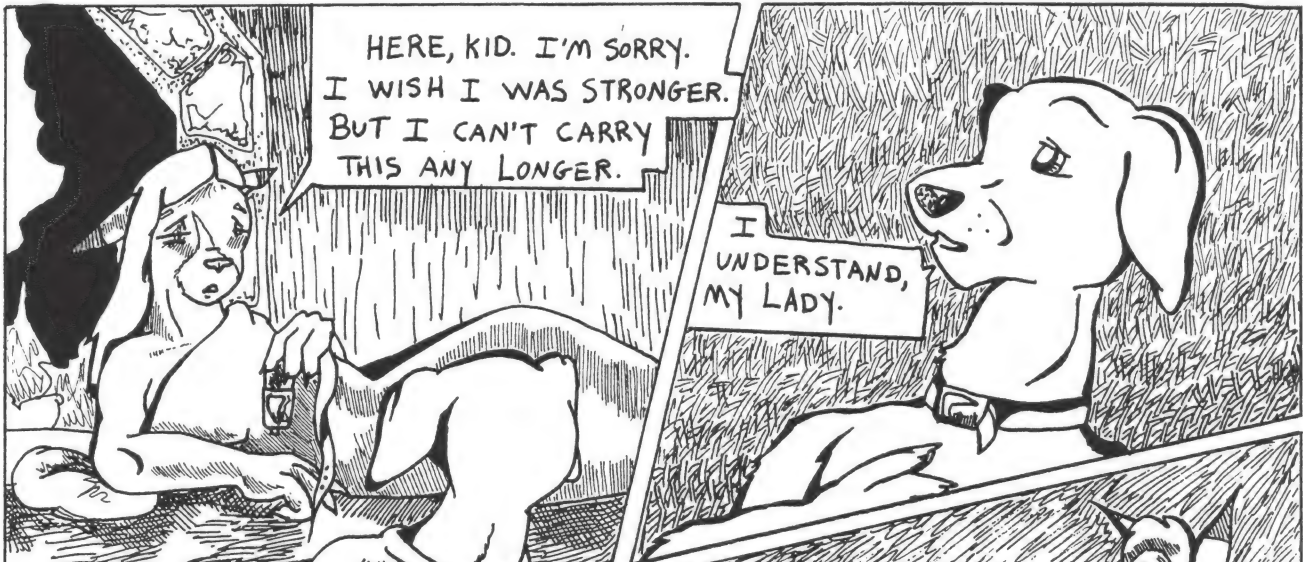
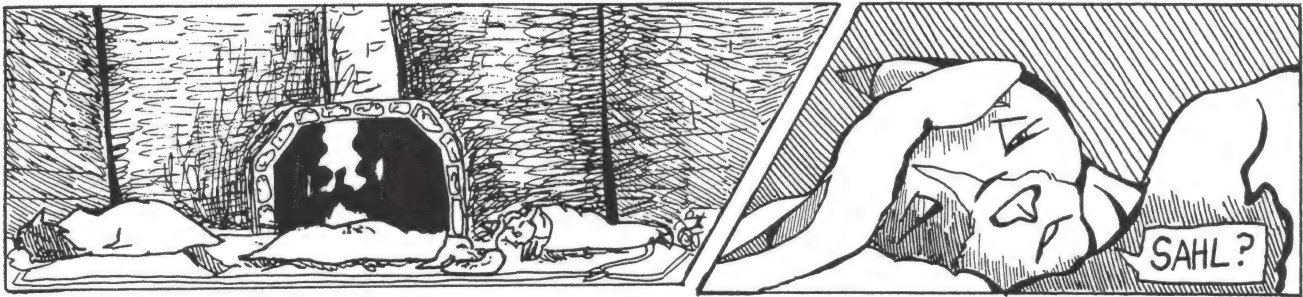












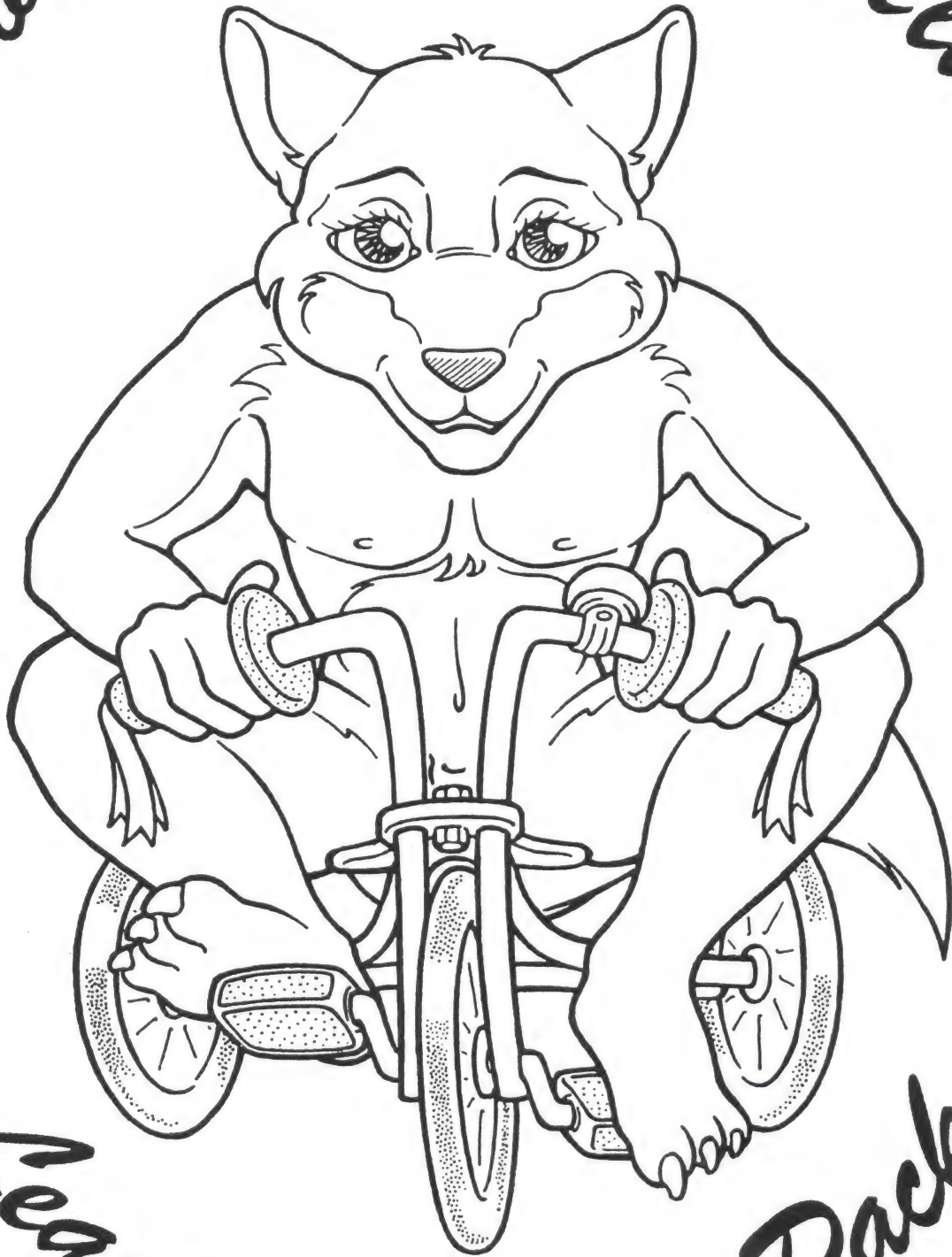






TIGGER!
©94

Born To Be Wild



Leader Of The Pack

© 2.96

Little John ©95
B.15







TYGGER © Tygger Graf
Grey © Richard Bartrop

-A-PRO196-
ONE FINE DAY AT
THE COFFEE POT....





This isn't on every channel is it?

Actually it is. Must be a pretty major celebration.

Damn! And I was hoping to see the cricket too.



Hey, I always thought it was only sport that could do this kind of thing.

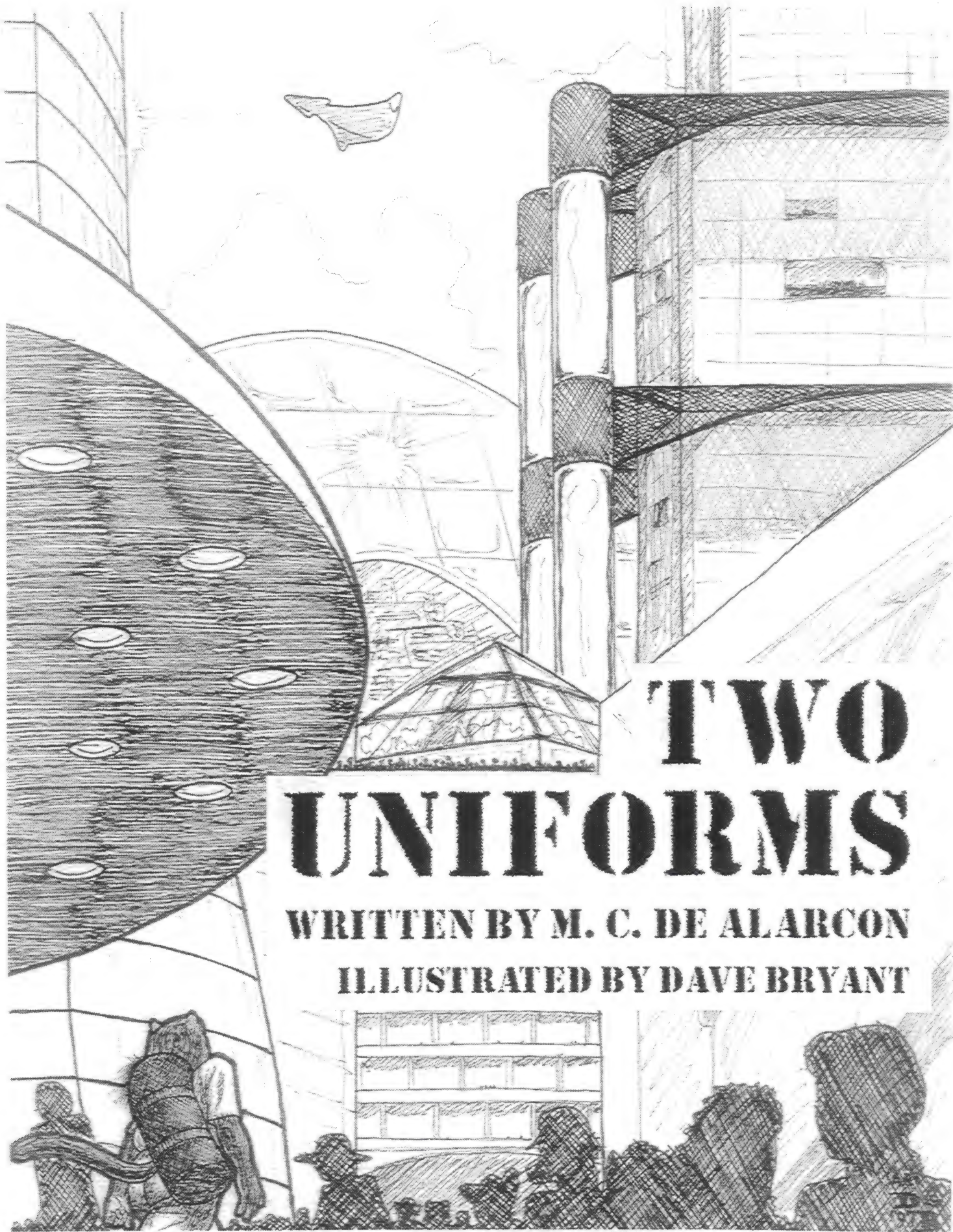
Yeah, that and Crapiest Stupidest Home whatever shows.

I've got a better idea. Who's up for getting a video?

I am.

Count me in.

Me.



TWO UNIFORMS

WRITTEN BY M. C. DE ALARCON

ILLUSTRATED BY DAVE BRYANT

Alysha Forrest stepped off the monorail and walked into the city. The trip to Terracentrus had taken almost three weeks by rail, the only passage she could afford, but she had one week left to register for fall semester at Fleet Academe. The tarnish of her recent months fell from the Karaka'An's shoulders as she lightly touched down on the pavement, duffel bumping against her hips as she jogged out of the station to get her first glimpse of the city. What she'd seen of its skylines against the growing dawn had only whet her imagination, delicate curves and spires thrusting into the pale cloud banks. She pushed past the few people in her way and out as the glass doors slid open for her.

Sunlight melted over her body as Alysha stared at the vista. People of all races streamed up and down the streets, mottled pelage in shades of gray and brown, orange and white and red and melted ice azures. Above the veins defined by the crowns of their bobbing heads rose the buildings, their edges streaked with watered cream and buttery-rich yellows as the sun rose. They despoiled in exotic colors revealed against the sharp rays of light, snowy blues and peaches daubed with red. Towers rose in spiralled whites like the horns of mythical creatures beside the solid fluted blocks of sun-dried scarlet edifices. Thin bridges threw themselves across impossible spans, woven out of spiderwebs and crystals that glittered fiercely in the new light.

Hundreds of scents spilled across her nose as the Karaka'An stood stunned at the doors of the monorail station: rich meat pastries shot through with alien spices, the tantalizing odors of creatures from other worlds mingled with the more familiar smells of Karaka'A and Seersa, and through it all a breeze lightly touched with the weight of water, moving, always moving. The sounds proved equally disorienting, the muted roar of a busy street, voices blending into one great symphony.

Shading her eyes, Alysha stepped into the tumult, her heart rising until she thought it would burst from her chest. Belatedly she identified the emotion: joy. She strode to the edge of the monorail station and ducked into the respite of an info-stop.

"May I help you?" a delicate Tam-illee asked, her wheat-blond hair swinging lightly around her white chin.

"I'd like directions to the Academe, please," Alysha asked, offering a smile in return.

The female foxine chuckled softly, "Ah, another cadet-to-be, I see? We get a lot of those. Would you like hard-copy or transmission to your data tablet?"

Alysha split open her duffel and dug for her tablet, then offered it to the Tam-illee. "Softcopy, please."

The Tam-illee nodded, ears pricking as she received the battered unit and slid it against the dual contacts in her station. She tapped a button, then presented the tablet to Alysha, tracing the route. "This is where you are, on Millennium Walk. Millennium is one of the center lanes for the city. . . . Along with six other streets, it bisects all the walks, streets, and boulevards in Terracentrus. Just walk north until you reach the fringe of the commercial area. You'll pass a few residential areas, and then it'll clear up and you'll find yourself at the gates of the Fleet Complex."

"A long walk?" Alysha asked, trying to gauge distances.

"Maybe forty-five minutes, if you're light on your feet," was the reply. "We're on the eastern edge of the city."

"This is only the edge of the city?" Alysha asked, incredulous. She couldn't help glancing back over her shoulder at the high-rises.

The Tam-illee laughed kindly. "One day you'll have to visit Center Walk where it intersects Main Street. Then you'll see the real city."

Shaking her head, Alysha resealed her duffel. "Thank you, alet."

As she turned to go, she heard a quiet, "Wait." Curious, she stopped and glanced over her shoulder, only to find the Tam-illee offering her a gold fin.

"Take it," the female urged gently as Alysha hesitated. "Please." The Tam-illee smiled, her ears coloring slightly. "I have two children, one near your age. It's a long walk, and he gets hungry every fifteen minutes. You look hungry as it is."

Alysha's lips twitched, torn between a sheepish smile and a grimace. Low-pay rail fare did not satisfy the stomach. She took the coin respectfully, then said again, "Thank you, alet."

"Good luck."

Alysha smiled, then ducked out of the stop and into the sunlight again. She looked into her palm where the fin nestled, then wrapped her dark fingers around it. Orienting herself by the sun's position, Alysha faced east and followed her nose to a pastry shop where the fin bought her a meat pasty and a small loaf of bread that she stowed in her duffel. Data tablet in one hand and brunch in the other, the Karaka'An felt exhilaration rising again, and she started off at a smart pace.

Her attention warred between the tablet and the color of the city. She learned from the map that all walks ran east-west, all streets north-south, and all boulevards diagonally. The map also demonstrated how little experience she had with cities of the scale of Terracentrus. She tried to calculate the distances from the size of the map and found she could not hold an image of the city in her head. It was too large — only fitting for the summer capital of the Alliance.

Alysha put away her data tablet, the route etched into her mind, and let her fingers occupy themselves with holding together the hot pasty. The first bite brought a low sigh of pleasure. It had been several months since she'd had hot food of this caliber, or any meat. The pasty didn't last long; the Karaka'An licked her fingers clean in her enthusiasm before returning her gaze to the cityscape, watching the people flow past. She'd never seen so many people, and of so many varied kinds. Her hometown had sported a good mix of Karaka'A and Seersa with the rare Tam-illee or Asanii, but Terracentrus was an object lesson in the diversity of the Alliance. She even spotted one of the alien K'Saar, low to the ground as it padded sinuously past on four velvet feet.

Competing with the people for her attention scrolled a never-ending row of shops, and she often paused to glance in at the vendors; clothing stores caused her to finger her worn garments without conscious thought. Others sold jewelry, still others appliances or commodities, real estate or personal recreational vehicles. A store selling personal tech almost pulled her inside with its display of upgraded data tablets, and it was only with effort that she set on her course again.

It was too rich a banquet for one morning. Alysha drank her fill and felt heady, but a steady tugging at the underpinnings of her mind drew her away from the sights and sounds and scents. She jogged steadily down the walk until the tall buildings began to fade away, replaced by low scrollwork gates and entrances to housing developments. The breeze fell more easily through the crannies of the city here, and it gently threaded fingers through her dark hair, pulling it astray. Alysha tore long breaths of air as she continued, straining her eyes for any sight of her destination.

She found it ten minutes later: a clearing at the end of the walk, then a large gated complex in which rolling fields and towering trees broke from the cityscape and recalled the roots of nature. A collection of low-lying buildings occupied the northernmost edge of the estate; she saw a regal house rising against the fringe of the southern side. As the gate drew nearer, she saw two guards, dark Hinichi with abbreviated muzzles and tails rigid despite the wind. Behind them on a tall pole, the Academe flew the Alliance flag and beneath it the Fleet's.

Alysha strode up to the gates and stopped, uncertain. The guards looked more like statues than people, until one of them broke and asked, "Good morning. How may we serve?"

"I'm looking for the application office," Alysha said, ears pointing forward and shoulders pushed back.

"That's inside and directly to the right."

Alysha glanced past the guard. "In the guard tower?" she asked.

"Just so." She thought she detected humor and smiled hesitantly in reply, then walked past the guard and onto the threshold of the Academe. She was so near her hair stood on end. Eagerly, the Karaka'An stepped into the guard tower, a squat round structure of stone that stood only a story and a half high.

Sunlight flooded the interior of the tower from a window in the northeast. A long desk ran half the circumference of the tower, and several people worked behind it. Alysha approached one of them.

"Good morning. How may we help you?"

"I'd like to apply," Alysha answered.

She received a warm smile in reply. The Seersan waved her to a seat and said, "You'll have to fill out this application here. How will you be paying — monthly, biannually, or annually?"

Alysha froze. "I forgot. . . I need to apply for a scholarship."

Though the other operators continued working, she was certain that utter silence reigned within the tower office. The Seersan said, "I'm sorry, but all scholarships have been handed out for this academic year. You'll have to wait until this time next year to apply."

"Do you have work-study programs?" Alysha asked. She couldn't bring herself to realize that luck had finally deserted her.

"No," the male answered, honest regret in his voice. "We used to, but they were repealed."

Alysha sat because she was unable to move. Something of how lost she felt must have reflected on her face, since the male said gently, "You might try to get work in the city. It's hard for an undergraduate to find work that pays enough, but sometimes. . . ."

A course of action. Alysha embraced it to keep herself from falling. "Where do I go?"

"The nearest info-stop is a few blocks south of here on Strop Street," the Seersan answered. "You can go there to ask for job openings."

"Thank you," she answered mechanically, standing. "I'll be back."

The male paused, then nodded. "I hope so. See you soon."

She found the info-stop ten minutes later. Alysha planted herself in one of the kiosks and let her duffel drop to her feet, ignoring the spool of people winding in and out of the room. "Privacy screen, please."

A soft hum reached her ears from a foot behind her. The displays flicked to life, a sigil scrawled across the screen hugged by the legend, "Terracentrus: Center of the Accord in Summer". A small white dot flashed on and off in the upper right hand corner, indicating a ready status.

Her hands lit on the edges of the display. "How much a year is it to go to the Academe?"

The computer politely replied, "Cost for one cadet, with room and two meals a day, for one academic year is sixty thousand fin."

Alysha braced herself against the sudden vertigo that assailed her. Sixty thousand fin a year was within the scope of a professional working in their field, or maybe a particularly hard-working layman, but certainly not a student. Nevertheless, her voice rasped from her throat. "Search for job openings in Terracentrus that might yield sixty thousand fin a year."

A few seconds later, two pages scrolled through the display. Alysha watched them dispassionately. When the computer finished, she said, "Eliminate those that require educational honors past high school."

All of them vanished.

Alysha stared at the blank screen for several minutes, then roused herself. "Show listing of the jobs that don't require honors, make more than eleven thousand a year and approach sixty thousand a year. List how much each pays, and where each is located."

Only nine entries rolled across the screen. Jaw clenched, Alysha withdrew her data tablet from the duffel and snatched the information, absently thinking she should upgrade her tablet to one of the u-band-linked models. When the entries flowed onto her tiny tablet's screen, she hoisted her bag over her shoulder and left the building, thumbing through the listing for the closest job opportunity. A few moments with the map given to her by the helpful Tam-illee at the first info-stop and she strode away, chin high. The morning had begun to age, but all of the afternoon stretched before her. In a city so beautiful, there had to be an answer for her.

• • •

The sun balanced on the horizon, a bloated red disk swaddled in vaporous clothes of lavender and bronze. Its squalid rays pierced the alleys, pulling Alysha's shadow across Magnate's Walk toward the opposite curb. She plodded in and out of pools of copper light; the weight of her head made it impossible for her to stand straight. Her legs dragged toward the ground, her shoulders ached from the tension of the duffel's strap, but nothing compared to the bleak despair that threatened her soul. She had anticipated winning a scholarship or a place in one of the now-defunct work-study programs within hours of arriving at Terracentrus, then being shown her cabin in the students' quarters and given a hot meal after orientation. Instead, footsore and weary, Alysha found herself wandering the outermost edges of town. Her meager bank balance would do her no good. Since it was already too little to win her entrance to school, she padded down the streets with the sun in one eye, seeking a hostelry cheap enough for her to stay the night, possibly several.

When she'd proven underqualified for the nine openings she'd found at the info-stop, she'd returned to a different stop and listed the next tier of jobs, seeking any kind of employment. The only kind she'd found open had been those of the lowest pay-rate, barely four fin an hour for twenty hours a week. Earning that much, Alysha reflected bitterly, she might have been able to afford one of the blankets at the Academe, but not much else.

Some part of her remained unwilling to admit that she had exhausted all her options. As she plodded down the walk, ignoring the facades of the buildings, Alysha idly calculated in her head how long it would take for her to earn enough to pay for a year at the Academe working full-time at one of the four-fin-an-hour jobs. The analytical half of her mind began riffling through the ranks between cadet and captain. Even if she spent a maximum of two years at each rank, it would still be more than twelve years before she made captain. If she skipped school to work for the tuition, it might be years before she had enough. . . .

Her options weren't good enough! Alysha stopped abruptly and leaned against the wall, gritting her teeth against the surge of despair. When she lifted her head, casting her gaze around the walk, she realized suddenly that she was lost. The sun had vanished past the horizon, and the musty blue shadows of twilight crept too close to her. The lights of the city shimmered over the tops of the surrounding buildings, but they seemed distant compared to the immediacy of the darkness around her. Few lights illuminated the walk, and the facades of the buildings had crumbled into disrepair. Windows bubbled with the strange patterns of shattered flexglass obscured the interiors of the dark houses and decrepit shops. Alysha glanced behind her shoulder and then forward again and could find no people within view. As she watched, one of the street lamps guttered feebly into life, its illumination uncertain and variable.

This was nothing like Blacklight at home. Blacklight had sported the town's seedier establishments, blurring the lines between legality and criminality, but there had been floods of people moving through it. This deserted place on the edge of dusk struck Alysha to the core, and the acrid tang of fear bit her tongue for the first time since her early adulthood. She began to hurry along the walk, eyes darting from shadow to shadow, heading west towards the next street. She tried to stay within the light of the street lamps, but more of them proved nonfunctional than working and she spent long minutes in the growing darkness, fighting an irrational need to flee.

When the glitter of lights caught her eye, Alysha let out a long breath of relief and jogged towards it, hoping for an info-stop or a place she could eat and rest. She drew near, catching a glimpse of a front porch flooded with light from overhead lamps. An unremarkable building, its windows had been boarded over and the door tightly shut, but no signs of neglect could be found in its walls.

The cracks had been sealed, the grime washed from the arches of the door and the windowsills.

There was a sign propped up against the window. It read, "WANTED: Exotic Dancer. Average pay 100-300 fin/night. Apply within."

Alysha's heart slowed. She could hear her pulse in her ears, a slow, globulousthrobbing. She did not recognize her hand as she reached out and touched the sign, tracing the numbers. The dusk had withdrawn, and the lights fell down a void with her mind, its last wail a reminder of the definition of "exotic dancer". She wasn't listening as she touched the door chime.

A wolfine face appeared as the door slid back, a heavy Hinichi male with striking yellow eyes. His thick bass had a gravelly aspect. "Yes?"

"I'm applying for your job."

"You are?"

Alysha stared at him, eyes unfocused. "Yes."

He paused, then stepped away from the portal. "Come in. What are you, Asanii?"

"No," Alysha answered as she hitched her duffel absently. "Karaka'An."

"Sweet Savior, but I didn't see your legs!" the Hinichi said, then began to laugh. "Tiell'll love you. Never seen a Kark get so tall, 'specially a fem." As she walked past him into the dark room, he asked, "Exactly how tall are you, alet?"

"An even six feet, I think," Alysha replied, glancing around.

The Hinichi grinned. "Have a seat. I'll get the manager."

She nodded, barely noticing when he faded from view. She sat at one of the tables near the boarded window, smoothing her hand over its regular surface. The chairs were supremely comfortable, and her feet ached from the strain of the day. Alysha dropped her duffel onto another chair and leaned forward against the edge of the table. Her mind had been disconnected; it was the only explanation. She had been sheltered growing up as a child, but she knew what an exotic dancer was and what they were occasionally called upon to do, but when these arguments were thrust upon her mind, all she could see were the numbers on the sign outside. They promised her an education, and the stars. She would do what she must to secure her future.

Scuffling footfalls alerted her to the return of the Hinichi, following a reedy-thin Asanii male. Alysha formed a fleeting impression of a gaunt figure, hollowed cheeks, and a restless, sly anger as he walked to her table. The feline offered her his hand in the human greeting, and Alysha slid hers into it and let him shake. His grip surprised her with its wiry strength.

"So, you saw our sign and want in, do you, girl?"

"How much money will I be paid?" Alysha asked.

"Depends on how good you are," the reedy male answered. "If you're okay, you'll probably get from seventy-five to one hundred fin a night. If you're spectacular, you might make as much as six hundred."

Six hundred. Alysha's eyes glazed, then she looked up at him. "If you want me, I'll take it."

"Well, then, let's get on with finding out if we want you or not," the manager answered. He flicked a switch, and a stage she hadn't noticed in the back of the room sprang into view. "Stand up and move into the light, there."

Alysha pushed her chair back and threaded through the tables to the side of the stage, climbed four stairs, and stood in the middle of the light. With the glare in her eyes she found she couldn't see the two males, though a scuffling of chairs told her ears they had taken seats in the front row.

"Sun's backside! You're tall and thin for your race, girl."

She wasn't sure how to reply, but offered a clipped, "Yes."

"I like that. You fit part of the 'exotic' bill. Let's see how much more of it you fit. Strip."

Alysha's ears flicked back. "Pardon?"

"Strip, girl, strip. You don't dance in very much clothing on stage, and rarely with any backstage."

She saw stars in her eyes from the dazzling lights, but in her mind she could see a field of suns stretching between the Alliance and its few neighbors into the unknown. Silently she shed her tunic, kicked off her sandals and breeches, then finally drew her underclothes away and dropped them to the floor. Eyes closed, she stood in the spotlight and waited.

"Verrrry nice. Turn around . . . slow, now."

Obediently, Alysha did so, taking wide, flowing steps.

"You move good, too. Let's see how much more you can move. Cue some music for me, Daren." She could dimly see the manager as he pushed to the edge of the stage and addressed her. "I want you to dance for me, girl. And I don't mean any cute stuff either. Dance like you're selling your body to a hundred people, and do it dirty."

Alysha stared down at him, then nodded before any objections rose in her own mind. It wasn't too late to back out, some part of her cried. Another reminded her that she had never done anything like this before, that a person her age shouldn't have the required experience to dance like she was selling her body to one person, much less a hundred. As the music started, a sensual song that was more rhythm than melody, Alysha ignored all the protests in favor of the most important injunction that

rose to the forefront: do it well; do it better than they've ever seen before. *Get the job.*

She hesitated, calling up the only moments in her life that had acquainted her with her own sexuality, precious few experiments that had given her a pleasure she'd found enjoyable but too temporal for her interest. Then she moved her hands over herself, slowly at first. She rocked her hips, dipped into a partial crouch... and danced. She wasn't aware of the time passing, was only peripherally aware of the arousal she forced on herself as the music broke around her ears. All her concentration bent upon the task at hand, and the world spun away.

The silence startled her back into the present, and a sense of shame flooded her in its wake. Alysha stood uncertainly, waiting for her reception.

The sound of a chair tipping back, then a basso growl — Daren, the Hinichi. A slow bark came from the table, a sound Alysha parsed abruptly as a jerking laugh from the manager, who said after a few moments, "Rhack it, girl, but you'd get a mattress hard just by sitting on it."

A flush ran through her ears, but Alysha paid it no mind. "You'll hire me?"

"One test left," the manager said. "You look good naked. You dance like you were born to. But there's one more thing any dancer that works for Phantasies has to be good at. See that block there? Face it and lean over it."

She glanced to the right. The block on the stage reached almost to her waist, a narrow and solid projection. She walked to it and pressed her lower stomach against its edge, then folded over it wearily. Between the long trek and the dancing, she had very little energy left; worse, she hadn't eaten since early morning, and she felt the gnawing of hunger acutely after her exertions. Her eyes fluttered closed.

When the AAP hissed against her neck, Alysha jerked upright. "What was that?"

"Something required for all our girls," the manager assured her, his hand falling on her back. Alysha suppressed the urge to shake it off. "The block doubles as a scanner, so you can be sure it won't hurt you."

"What was it?" Alysha repeated, trying to blink past the glare as the manager left her line of sight and the hand lifted from her back.

His voice came from behind her as his hands gripped her rump. "A little something to keep you from getting pregnant."

Alysha's eyes flew open and she reached out to gain enough leverage to twist away, but not before the male behind her pulled her legs apart and thrust into her. Starbursts smeared against the inside of her corneas in unexpected pain, and she heard the manager mumble behind her, "Virginal. Very nice. We'll make it quick then, so we can rebuild it and auction you off this week."

The second thrust brought her mind barrelling back into unison with her body, and Alysha regained full awareness of her situation: she was pressed against a block being raped, but it was her dignity or her future, and if it was the future she wanted she had to let it continue. For a brief instant she felt the whisper of despair, but a surge of uncontrollable and violent anger knocked it aside and boiled upwards. It was the injustice; it was the result of a moment's paranormal vision into the future, of the total cost of her ascension to the stars. It infuriated her.

On the third stroke, it erupted from her mouth, not an admission of misery or defeat, but a howl of rage. She heard laughter from behind her, felt the male tangle his fingers in her hair and jerk her neck back so that the scream leapt up an octave.

"You'll be hard to break. I love the wild ones," he hissed into her ear. Her eye rolled back.

A few minutes later, he spent himself and withdrew, leaving her sprawled across the block. He waved an idle hand. "You're hired, pet. Go backstage and get the others to clean you up, feed you. . . . You'll debut tonight."

Alysha raised her head with effort, trying to push the rage back behind her teeth. She dragged herself upright and found it difficult to walk. Her lower body throbbed, the insides of her thighs slick with fluid. As she moved towards the steps, the manager said, "One more thing . . .



you'll need a stage name." His hand snaked out of the darkness and caught her chin, and in her surprise Alysha extruded her claws and threw up her arm in a swipe.

He caught it at the wrist. The Asanii's grip had all the merciless pressure of a vise, and his eyes flared. "Never," he hissed, "ever pop your claws at me, pet. Keep them velvety, or I'll take them. Understood?"

She managed a nod, and suffered herself to be examined as he tilted her face this way and that. She heard the grin in his voice as he said, "A stage name . . . I think I have just the thing. We'll call you 'Steel', since you seem to think that's what you're made of. We'll see which one of us is right." He released her wrist and pointed at the door next to the stairs offstage. "That way. Tell Cinnamon to get you one of the ice costumes for tonight."

Alysha nodded, suddenly wanting nothing more than to get out of the blinding light. She hobbled carefully down the stairs and through the door.

She was expecting some new trial, which was why she was surprised when she was greeted by a solicitous young voice. Before she could find the source, Alysha found herself remembering Risa, the young girl from her home that had taken to following her. The resemblance ended with the first glance. Lushly furred tail swinging behind her, a slim teenage Tam-illee stood on the threshold of the landing. Two halls formed a right angle with its pivot on the door, and the girl was standing against the hall leading to the east. The red velvet wallpaper outlined her in sharp relief; her pelt was the white of falling snow, her hair a bare shade darker, a misty lemon-yellow curtain that fell over her shoulders in spiral curls. Gray eyes occupied the youth's face, and lips pulled into a worried frown far too adult for her countenance. "Here, lean on me."

Alysha stared down nearly two feet at the foxine girl. "You must be kidding," she managed as the shock of her evening began to sink in.

"You're hurt," the girl said matter-of-factly, reaching out and capturing one of Alysha's hands in her own tiny fingers. "Come on. . . Honey is waiting in the common room. She'll make you feel better."

Under the earnest gaze of the youth, Alysha began to move, her steps deliberate and stiff. The insides of her belly and thighs felt alien to her; she'd never understood that her body was a vessel. Not the way she did now. She felt the girl's other hand touch her gently on the side, guiding her down the hall as she fought her nausea.

"My name's Rispa . . . that's what they call me here, anyway, after the Seersan Mist Sister. What's your name?"

"Alysha Forrest," Alysha answered wearily. She tried not to look down at the girl, realizing for the first time that the youth walked as naked as she did. There was

something obscene about the tiny breasts with their up-turned tips and the soft down of the girl's lower stomach when juxtaposed against the gaudy velvet wallpaper and the worn wooden paneling on the lower section of the walls.

"That's a pretty name," Rispa said as she pulled the dark Karaka'An into a room where several other females reclined. One or two of them glanced up as they entered. "What's your name here going to be?"

"Steel," Alysha answered.

"That's more poetic than Tiell usually gets," one of the females in the room commented as she rose, hurrying to their side. "Ach, but he got you badly, didn't he, arii? Lie down! Rose, love, where's the medkit? Merinlejetzal, look at all the blood!"

"That's Honey," Rispa whispered.

Alysha allowed herself to be coaxed onto one of the couches. As the females fluttered around her, she gazed at the room; like the halls, its upper portions had been papered in red velvet, the lower portions, like the floor, a worn wooden paneling. Several free-floating lamps hung in the corners of the room, which was otherwise filled with comfortable sofas and chairs. Pillows lay strewn across the floor. A small desk had been set up beneath one of the cabinets.

Rispa knelt on the floor near Alysha's head and pet her shoulder gently; the girl's concerned gaze both reassured and disconcerted. Alysha was relieved when the youth glanced away as Honey returned with a bowl of hot water, a towelette and the medkit. The older female was a Harat-Sharin nat-tigress, her brown stripes widely distributed over her golden body. Unlike Rispa, Honey wore clothing: a veil over her muzzle and two rings pierced through the tips of her breasts. As the Harat-Shar gently parted her legs, Alysha asked, "Do none of you wear clothing?"

"None of us, you mean," came another voice. A Tam-illee female, somewhat older than Alysha herself, entered her field of view. "You must be one of us now, or you wouldn't be backstage."

"No, none of us wear clothing," Honey answered as she gently began to clean the blood from Alysha's inner thighs. "Tiell doesn't like it."

Alysha had already put the manager together with the name 'Tiell'. She stiffened at the mention of it, and Honey's hand gently stroked the top of her thigh. "Relax, arii-love. Those muscles have had enough abuse without you adding more."

"He won't come here," Rispa added from her shoulder, gazing at her with guileless gray eyes. "This is the common room, where we relax. We can't close the door, but he doesn't come in."

Honey's deft work began to close the wounds in her body and soothe the muscles outside it, and Alysha's eyes rolled to the ceiling. She wondered what she had signed up for, unknowing.

• • •

As suggested by the cynical Harem Rose, Alysha squeezed in a few hours of sleep between her ordeal with Tiell and the operating hours of the club.

"We'll open around twenty mark," Rose had said, offering her a blanket as she curled into the cushions of the sofa, "But he won't bring out the shows until twenty-four mark. Until then, we're just Phantasies, a nightclub. After then, we're Find Your Phantasies, and Tiell trots out the illegal wares."

Despite her unease, her exhaustion guaranteed her a deep, dreamless sleep. She woke with the vague awareness that a heat occupied the bottom of her belly; when she isolated the sensation and felt the more subtle press of metal, Alysha jerked awake, claws shooting from her hands. "What —"

"Don't move!" One of Honey's hands pressed her back into the pillows. "I'm almost done."

"What are you doing?" Alysha hissed between her teeth.

"Rebuilding your hymen. We haven't had any virgins for a while . . . since Rose, in fact, but the procedure's always the same. Tiell knocks it out, we put it back for show, and then you dance for a few nights while the excitement of having an innocent drives the price of your blue key up."

Alysha's stomach turned, and only the tip of her tail lashing against the side of the couch betrayed her disgust. "Blue key?"

"Sure. We all sell our keys every night, unless we're not feeling well. It's the best way to make money. Usually Tiell chooses the colors for the night, puts them out, and then customers can buy them for as much time as they can afford between one and seven mark. White keys mean you'll dance for him privately, but he can't touch you. Blue keys mean he can rack you. There are other colors, but if Tiell wants you to sell them he'll tell you himself."

Her eyes glazed. "So I'll have to . . ."

"Yes." Honey looked up at her, tilting her head. "You're one of Rose's kind, aren't you?"

"Rose's kind?"

The tigraine nodded, withdrawing the instrument and flashing it with the disinfectant. "You know how the Tam-illee are."

She felt a flush rising to her ears, but said quietly, "Actually, I don't."

"The meaningful-sex kind."

"There's another kind?" Alysha asked, trying to imagine it. A muscle along the edge of her thigh twitched convulsively several times, and she pulled herself into a sitting position to massage it.

"Of course. There are my kind. The 'hey, great, this is fun' type." Honey's bow-shaped lips pulled upwards at the corners.

Alysha stared at her. "That's . . . strange."

Honey put the instruments away and packed the medkit back in the cabinet. "Just don't let your ways turn you bitter, the way they have Rose, all right, kara?"

"I'll try," Alysha promised, aware of how unreasonable it was.

After pressing some food on the gray Karaka'An, Honey led her to the dressing room, already occupied by Rose, Rispa, and a cunning-eyed Aera stretched across one of the sofas as she applied her cosmetics.

"Cinnamon, this is Steel, our newest. Manager said to give her one of the ice costumes."

Cinnamon, an Aera, flicked a glance towards Alysha, then rose smoothly from her laze. Unlike most of the Core races, the Aera had no obvious correlation to a Terran animal. Cinnamon had an extraordinary figure, tall with a waist Alysha thought she could fit between both her hands, an impressive bustline that balanced hips whose bones she could just see cresting through the luxurious coat of red-brown fur. Her unusually long, swept-back ears trailed decorative tufts of coffee-brown hair, matching the thick mane that tumbled over her shoulders down to the bottom of her buttocks. Tucked against her ankles, her feet wings shaded from pale cream along the inside folds down to near black at their edges. The Aera's eyes were a brilliant lime green; one of them had been elongated with kohl, the other only half-finished.

Cinnamon said, "Welcome to our little Phantasies, Steel." Her voice claimed all the surprising heat of her namesake and the sibilance of a Chatcaavan. "You're quite pretty."

Alysha cleared her throat. "Thank you."

"Tiell has a goodeye. The ice rack will suit you perfectly. In fact, I think I know just the one." The Aera glided towards one of the two walls Alysha suddenly realized were lined with closets. Tapping one open, Cinnamon rustled through the depths and withdrew something that sparkled under the lighting. "Here we are." She returned and proffered it to the Karaka'An. "I hope you like it."

Liking was not the word Alysha would have chosen. She ran her furless fingerpads and palms over a halter top composed entirely of gold and silver beads and amber gems. The belt hanging from the lower edge of the hanger left nothing to the imagination. None of it did, especially the locks on the backs of both items.

"You'll be needing a collar as well . . . best something plain. Straight silver, maybe," Cinnamon said.

Alysha's gaze flashed up to meet narrowed green eyes. "Collar?"

"Of course. You can't have any illusions left, can you?" the Aera asked, one high brow arching delicately over her unpainted eye.

"I am not an animal," Alysha answered, the heat rising in her voice despite her intent.

Cinnamon's hand on her jaw came as a complete surprise, a trailing caress of long, cool fingers tipped with jeweled nails that flashed at the edge of her vision. She didn't even remember to throw up her hands in defense, so swiftly had the Aera trapped the bottom half of her face. The trend towards such liberty with her body was beginning to gall Alysha, and she started to jerk away.

"Why are you here?" Cinnamon asked, a hiss of contempt, and, unaccountably, interest.

Alysha bared her teeth, lips pulling back. "I need the money."

Cinnamon glanced towards a table, then glided around behind Alysha, her hand falling from the dark Karaka'An's face. "Money."

"Is that too prosaic for you?" Alysha asked, teeth still visible. The other females in the room watched the discussion with avid interest, even little Rispa with her too-innocent eyes.

Faster than she could turn, a hand snapped around her neck and clamped around her throat, and she felt in its wake, Cinnamon's other hand sealing on something shockingly cold and thick. Alysha's head flinched upward against the sudden pressure, and she heard the click. She began to twist around, a snarl erupting from her mouth, when she felt the weight of something small bang into the back of her neck below the uncomfortable band. Stopping, she groped behind herself as Cinnamon watched until she came up with the weight, pressed her fingers around its shape until they traced the edges of a mag-keyhole.

"If it's money you're after, little sister, you won't win it with prissy snarls and outrage, not by shrouding yourself in veils and robes. You don't have to want it, but Wanderer damn it, you have to live with it."

Alysha stared at Cinnamon, her hand still clenched on the lock behind her neck. A thin shiver tried to run up her spine but she destroyed it before it crashed farther than the base of her tail. She lifted her chin, since she could not bow her head against the intractable metal of the collar, and said crisply, "I'll dress now."

Cinnamon smiled, lime-green eyes thinning to slits. "I'm certain you will."

• • •

She stood just behind the curtain, waiting out the last of the Harem Rose's dance with a cold ingot of metal in the pit of her stomach. With her ears flattened to her head she could just barely dampen out the sounds of her beaded top and belt swinging around her body, but nothing could tune out the sensation of the recirculated air striking her naked pelt.

"Are you ready?" Honey asked, turning from the view-space. "She's done. The manager'll wait a few minutes to let the crowd order more drinks, then he'll announce you. He'll do a short speech, then the music will cue and it'll be just like this afternoon."

Complete with the rape afterwards? Alysha wanted to ask, but refrained. That would come later, at the end of the week. She tossed her head, her hair swiping the tops of her shoulder-blades. The ice remained inside, and she wondered if it would ever melt. Worse, could she dance the way Tiell wanted her to dance feeling so numb inside?

"She's on her way in —"

"She's here," Rose said wearily, pushing through the curtain and wiping the sweat-drenched swatch of hair off her forehead. "Good luck, Steel. Have a great time." As the Tam-illee descended down the cramped walkspace, she added to Honey, "It's an impossible crowd tonight."

The sound of Tiell's voice boomed through the curtains. "And now for our newest attraction — the wild and cold-hearted Steel!"

"That's it!" Honey said, "Go, kara-love, go!"

Alysha sliced through the curtains silently, her eyelids pressed against her cheeks; even so she could feel the heat of the lights on her body, pulsing. Slowly she opened her eyes, barely hearing the manager's voice extolling her innocence in carnal matters, the coming auction for the rights on her first night at the end of the week. It was the people. The sheer number of people. The sight of them staring at her, all those gazes, the pressure of it wiped away every other sense and left her only with vision. There had to be two hundred packed into the dark, smoky room, all of them eating her alive with their stares, eyes full of hunger, eagerness, lust, and the same carelessness of people presented with a toy brought for their amusement.

She had seen more caring in the eyes of people playing with pets.

She had seen more empathy in the eyes of people flicking a street urchin a fin for a roll at the local bakery.

She had seen more life in the eyes of aliens flashing past in her school textfiles, more understanding in them whose features had no relation to hers, no correlation to hers, than in people of her own race, of her own world.

The hatred came back. Alysha couldn't tell if it was directed at herself, at those who leered at her with such dispassion, at the universe. It didn't matter. When the music slammed into her ears, reactivating her hearing, she threw herself into dancing. She pushed it past erotica into pornography. She moved sinuously, fluidly, and went through the motions of selling herself. And then she poisoned it with her contempt, injected it with her hauteur, wore her hatred emblazoned as a cold sneer on her face. She turned it into a weapon that told them she thought so little of them that she didn't even register them as being present. She flung it in their faces, knowing it would get her fired and unable to do anything else.

When the music ended, Alysha ground to a close, hands falling to her sides. She waited for the inevitable.

A hand grabbed at her ankle. Startled, she glanced at the crowd, only to find the bouncers holding them back as they besieged the stage. There was no anger in their eyes, only mad desire. At the back of the room, listening to the hoots and cheers and whistles and snarls of lust, Tiell leaned against the wall and rubbed his upper lip. He met her eyes, and greeted her shock with a thin, small smile.

Alysha fled behind the curtain, breathing hard, unable to see. She ran into Honey, who held her to keep her from falling, and all she could do was repeat, repeat because otherwise she'd scream until her throat burst into blood, "It was supposed to hurt them. It was supposed to hurt them. It was supposed to hurt them."

To which Honey's only reply, which Alysha remembered much, much later, was, "It's the ones who don't want them that they chase the more desperately."

• • •

"I have the money," she announced, her voice hoarse.

The Seersan glanced up at her, his brows rising. "I see," he said. Wordlessly, he handed her the form, and Alysha received it in equal silence. She retired to one of the chairs in the circular guard tower to fill it out. The gray Karaka'An faced away from the others in the room, shoulder jabbed into the cushion of the backrest, her legs tightly pressed together and her writing jerky with the stylus. The shock of the evening had not entirely worn off; she'd spent the night in the common room, alone until little Rispa had appeared near mark five and cuddled into the couch with her. Alysha had been awake, half-curved into a fetal ball and fighting a pressure in her throat that had been too much like tears. The young Tam-illee's arrival had given her something else to focus on, and she had been glad of the company.

It was behind her now. Her first pay for the night had cleared into her account, augmented by the amounts put down by those wanting to make a preliminary offer in the auction. And finally, she had the resources to pursue her goal.



"The goal, always," Alysha whispered to herself as she finished the form. Standing, she walked to the desk and handed the data tablet back to the Seersan, who glanced at it. A few moments later, he nodded and said, "I see you've been employed. You'll be on a monthly payment plan?"

"Yes," Alysha answered.

"Well then, it all clears." The Seersan smiled at her and said, "Welcome to the Academe. You'll find your room assignment on the bulletin board in Ralafin Park. Orientation today starts in an hour."

"Thank you," she answered, swallowing past the lump in her throat. She turned and walked towards the door.

The Seersan called after her, "I'm glad you made it in this semester, Cadet Forrest."

She had time to glance over her shoulder in surprise before she stepped outside the tower. Her heart pounded as she brought her eyes up to take in the campus, from inside this time. The flags of the Alliance and Fleet billowed lazily in the light wind, and the mass of buildings with their cultured foot-paths and the old forest in the corner of her vision, the occasional sign of movement, cadet blue . . . slowly her eyelids fell down, shutting it out, and she felt herself reaching out for the side of the guard tower to steady herself. Her means, her ends, her two uniforms suddenly overwhelmed her, and she couldn't move.

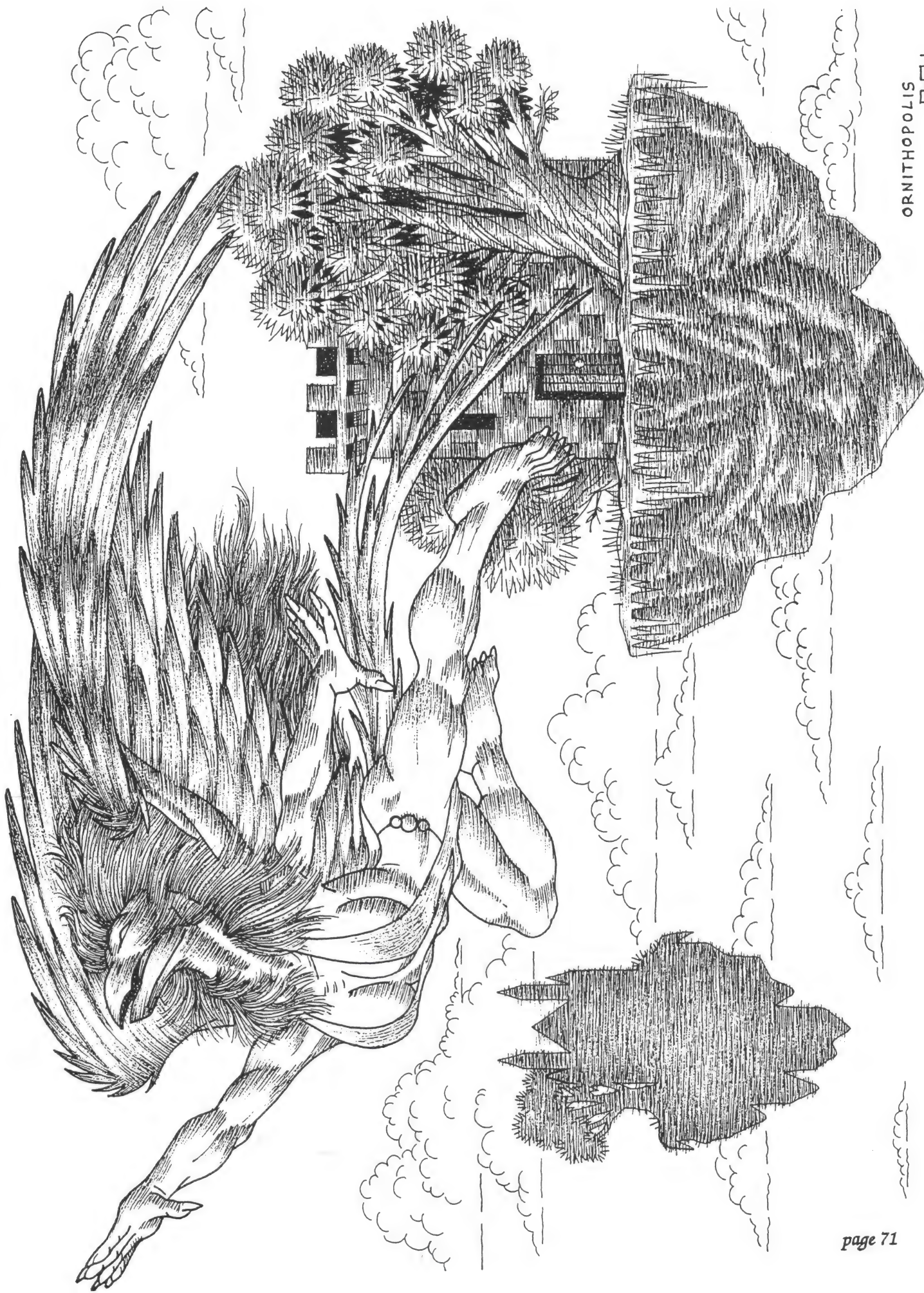
Alysha righted herself and took the first step, shedding the night at Phantasies behind her. There was wind at her throat instead of metal.

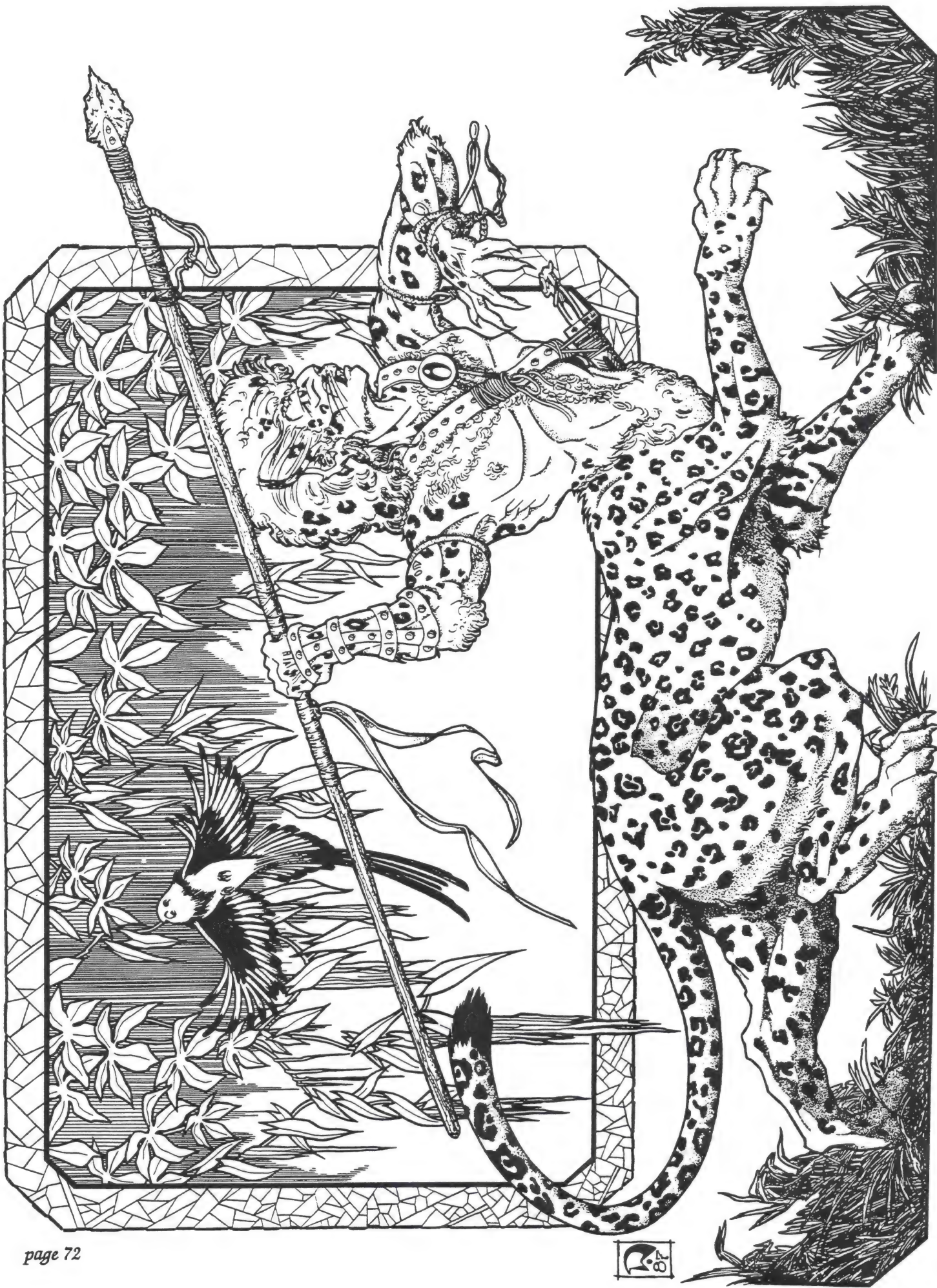






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"Sofia"

IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE, IT IS SAID "TIME KEEPS EVERYTHING FROM HAPPENING AT ONCE" — BUT, THERE ARE MOMENTS MORE CHAOTIC THAN OTHERS

WOW! LOOK AT IT GO!

SHE-OOT!-um-
LOS'ANUDDER 1

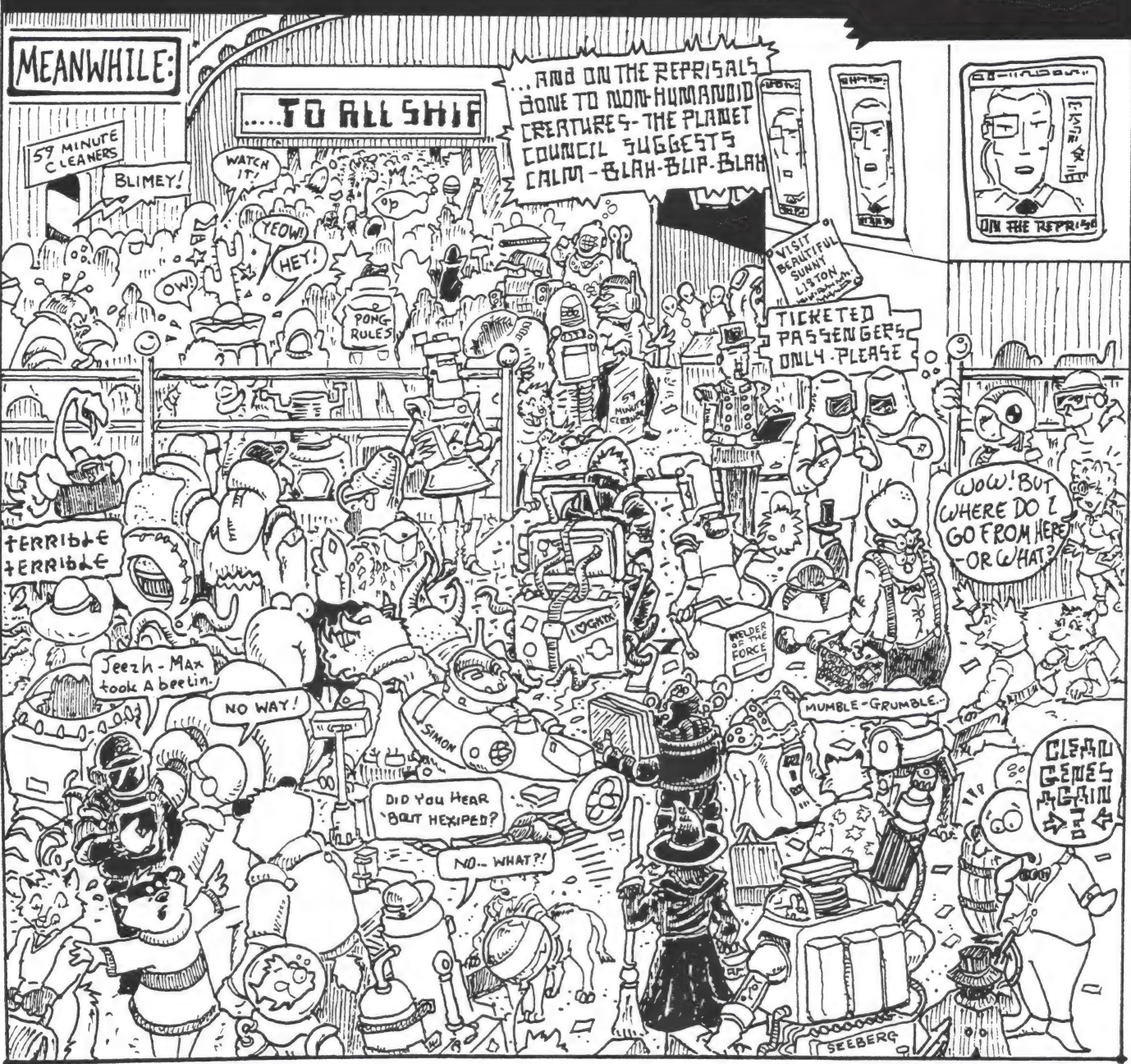
REMOVE YOUR PAW [?!]
FROM MY DAUGHTER'S POD!

YUCK! HEY! WHO'S DRIVING THIS THING? HUH?!

UH-OH

GIGGLE THAT
TICKLES! HE-HE!

YOU'RE GONNA NEED A
TREATMENT AFTER THIS -
FUR CAN CAUSE TROUBLE....



B42222



MEANTIME, WE ARRIVED (!)
AT WOOL BURY'S - DISCREETLY -

WHOO! WHOO! WHOO!

WARNING! OUT OF CONTROL VESSEL!
WARN-AAAGH! RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!!

WHO'S FLYIN'
THIS THING?

IS THERE
ANY BRAKES

POP!

SPUTTER

NOT AGAIN

INCOMING!

What's that?!

aaack!

BA-KOOMP!!

HAVE YOU
DONE THIS-
BEFORE?!

Is dis duh
next shipment?

OH-HI GUYS-
ANYTHING NEW?

BRUSH
BRUSH

DUST!
DUST!

HOP!

TINK!
CRACKLE
CRACKLE

SIZZLE
SIZZLE

CREAK

Hey! **RALPH** THE WONDER **HAMSTER** IN: **FLOATING**

DEBRIS
PART
12



CONTINUE INTERROGATIONS—
I WANT PROOF—HUH?!

HAMSTER?

HE'S MINE...

...HAMSTER ARRIVED
LOADING DOCK 23A

SKREEECH!

HMMAPFF!

GADS—LEAVE FOR TWO
ROTATIONS—AND THE
WHOLE PLACE GOES TO
SHAMBLES—JEESH!

I SUPPOSE YOU
WANT TO CHECK
OUT THAT ITEM
WE CAME TO SEE—

TAKE YOU TO THE
OBSERVATION LEVEL
AND WE CAN GO OVER
FROM THERE—OK?

flyin' buckets?

BLEW BOXERS

FLIT

It's-It's-RALLPH!
don't he know da
BOSS is after
his tail?!

YES—AS WE ARE
PRESSED FOR TIME

FRAGILE

BOY—WHAT
A MESS—
SORRY'BOUT THAT.

DATE
FERTILIZER

OVER THERE—
THE LARGE BOX
MARKED "DATE
FERTILIZER"—

AREA
88

YEP, GOT IT AT A
REAL GOOD PRICE—
SO WE CAN NEGOTIATE

YERK!!!

PILLERILLER

DO NOT DROP

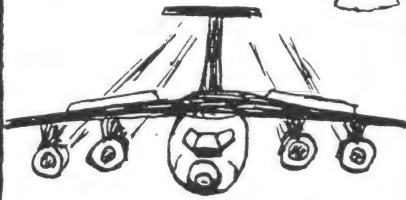
TO BE CONTINUED—
HELP!

"ONE NIGHT
OUT FLYING"

T. Knight * 1996



Good evening
passengers...



We will be landing in a
few minutes.



"Please ensure that your seatback
is upright..."



"... your seatbelt fastened..."

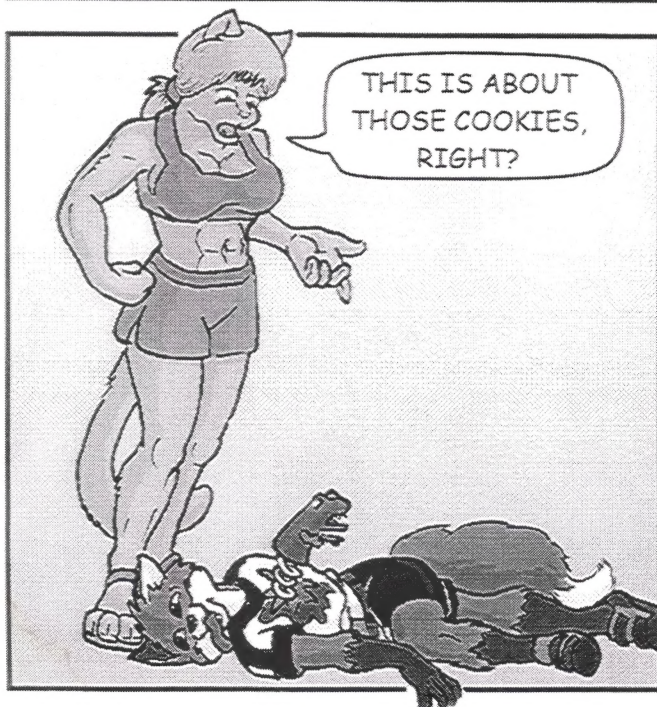
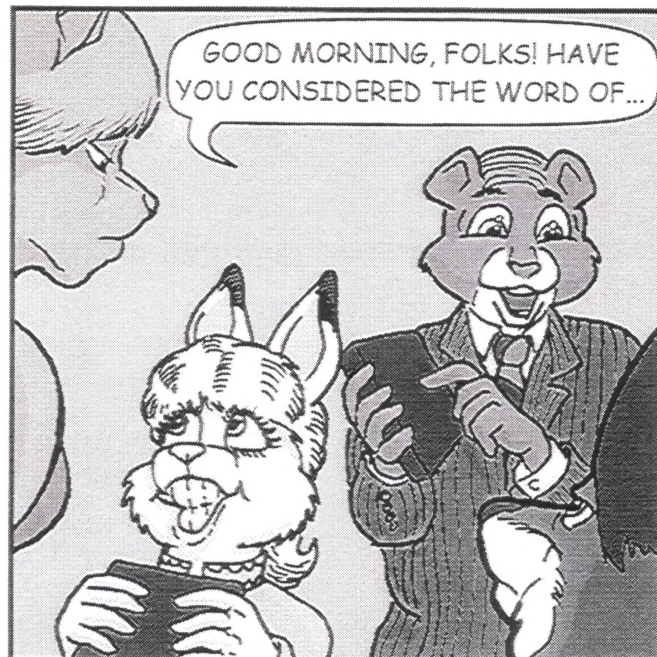
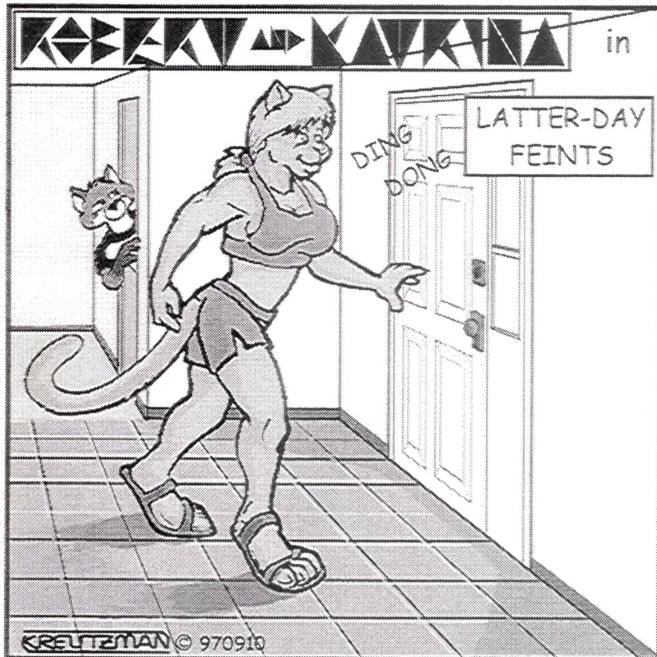


"...and that your stewardess is returned to her original upright position!"











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5/5